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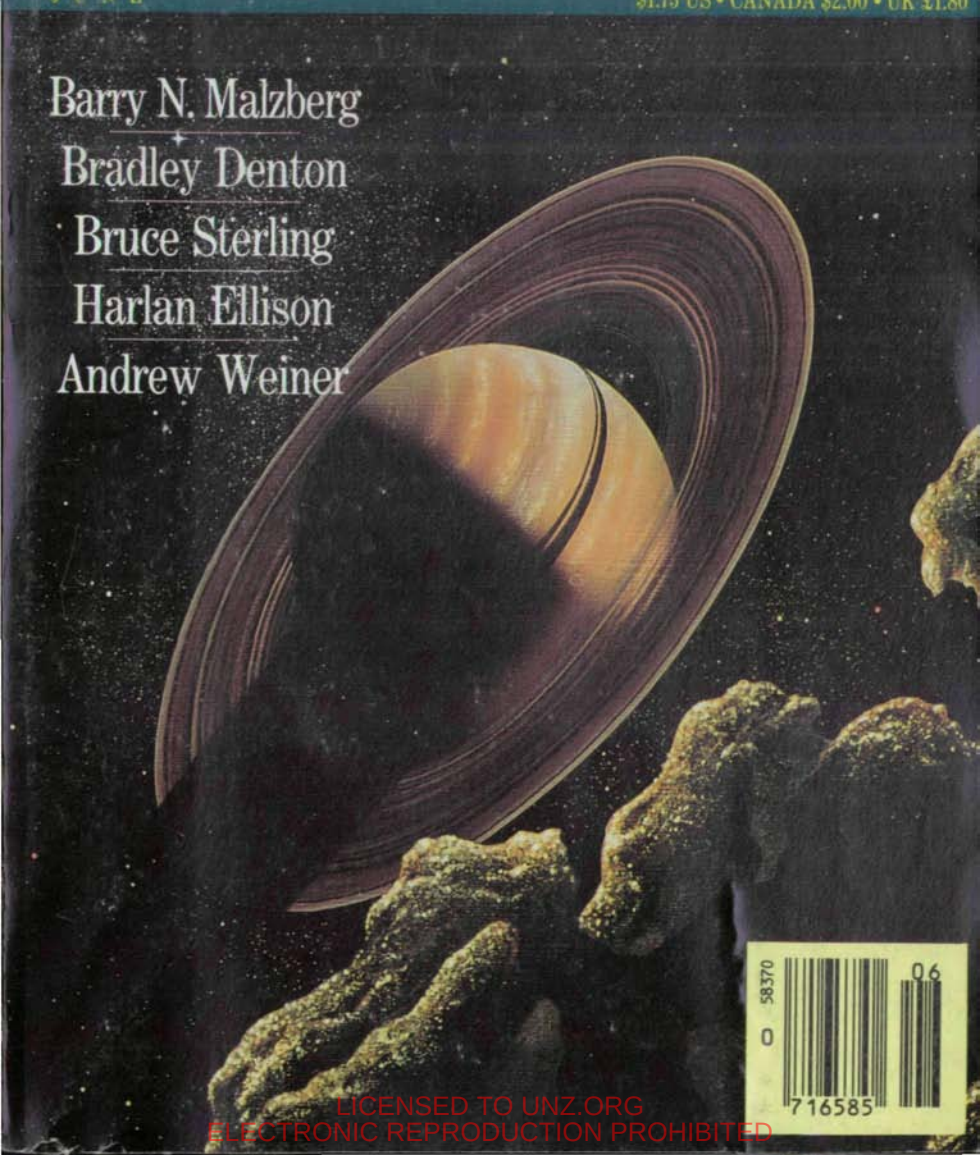

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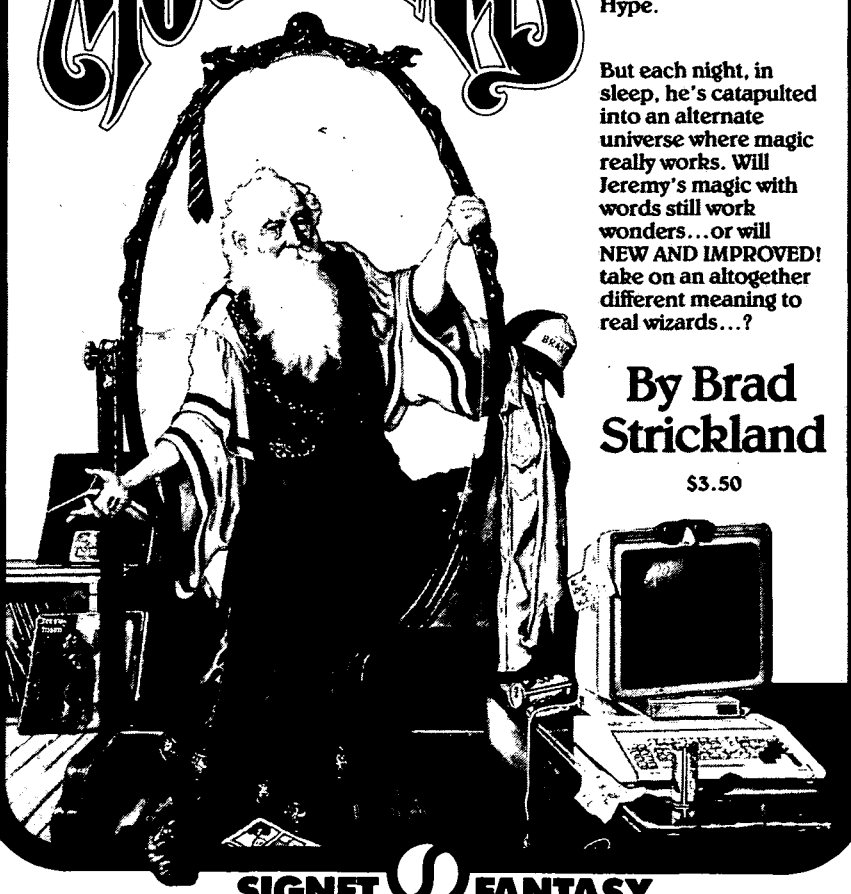

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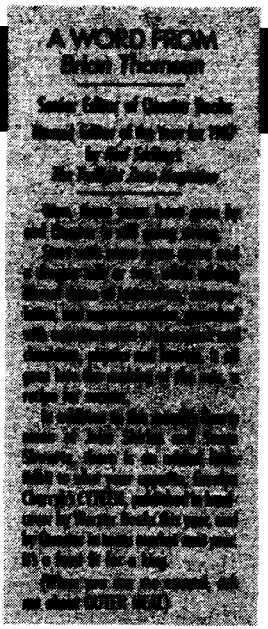

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Andrew Weiner ("Going To Meet the Alien," August 1987) returns with a story about Herschel Freeman, who had a stunning run of good luck until he was contacted by the aliens. As his new friends put it, "no lunch is unfree . . ."

The Man Who Was Lucky

By Andrew Weiner

1.

HERSCHEL FREEMAN HAD never thought of himself as an especially lucky guy. But neither was he particularly unlucky. Mostly, he fell somewhere in between.

Oh sure, like anyone else, Herschel had the occasional lucky break. One time at a New Year's Eve party, for example, a statuesque blonde financial controller fell into his arms and told him that she was attracted to soulful-looking men. They spent a few ecstatic weeks together before her company transferred her to Arizona and they lost touch. Another time he won a thousand bucks in the state lottery and bought a new Sony TV.

But for the most part, Herschel's life progressed on an even keel. Until one day, at the age of twenty-eight, his luck turned, suddenly and dramatically, for the better.

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2.

IT STARTED at work, where Herschel's boss was suddenly fired for incessantly sexually harassing the word processing pool.

The person next in line for the job refused it, having decided during the course of a recent mid-life crisis to spend more time on his gardening. There were many candidates besides Herschel at the next level down, several superficially more credible, and yet somehow he lucked out all the same.

"We've had our eyes on you, Fidelman," the executive vice president told him. "We know you can do the job. Just keep your hands to yourself in the word processing pool."

Herschel swore that he would, although his resolve would never be tested. The very next night, celebrating his promotion with a few friends in a downtown bar, he fell into a meaningful conversation with a tall and darkly attractive public affairs adviser at the next table. After a whirlwind romance, they were married two months later. Herschel was so ecstatically happy with Marianne that he hardly looked at another woman.

Then a great-aunt he had barely even heard of died childless at the age of ninety-three, leaving an estate to be divided among her living relatives. There were plenty of relatives, but also plenty of cash to go around. Herschel walked off with a cool sixty thousand, the largest check he had ever held in his life.

He used some of it to make the down payment on a house, and invested some more in blue chip stocks. But on a crazy kind of whim, he also took a flier on some penny mining stock he had heard some people talking about at the next table in a restaurant. The mine struck gold, or maybe it was platinum, and Freeman sold out at a forty-thousand-dollar profit.

After that came some more lucky investments, a free car from a sweepstakes run by the local bank, a lifetime supply of gourmet ice cream from an in-store contest, and a windfall gain on his house when developers needed the lot for an apartment building.

After a while, Herschel began to get a little nervous about his fantastically good luck.

"Jeez," he would say, after one lucky break or another. "I guess this is too good to last, isn't it?"

But somehow it wasn't.

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3.

AND THEN one day he received in the mail an offer of a free junket to Starworld, the new Las Vegas hotel-casino complex. It was Marianne who persuaded him to accept.

"But I don't even like gambling," he said.

"It'll be fun," she said. "Besides, Neil Diamond is on all week." Marianne was a big Neil Diamond fan.

"It must be some kind of mistake," Herschel said. "They give these trips only to big-time gamblers. People who are going to drop a pile on the tables."

"So they made a mistake," Marianne said.

With his recent run of luck, Herschel could well afford to pay for his own vacation. But it was hard to resist a freebie.

4.

YOU'RE A very lucky man, Mr. Freeman," said the casino manager.

"I guess so," Herschel said, ducking his head nervously. He had not really wanted to accompany the manager into his office, but on the other hand, he didn't like to be rude.

"A very lucky man," the manager said again.

Herschel silently chastised himself for getting himself into this position. After all, it was common knowledge that these places were run by the mob, one mob or another. Sure, they let some people win, now and again, to keep up the interest. But not *this* big.

"Two million dollars," the manager said. "That's a great deal of money. We don't usually see such big winners."

"I'm sorry," Herschel said brokenly. "I didn't even mean to play the tables. I was just going to play the machines. But after I won the jackpot, one of your assistants suggested I take a shot at roulette, and I didn't want to offend. . . ."

"No, no," said the manager. "No need to apologize. I merely wanted to congratulate you. And to offer you the opportunity to play a few hands of blackjack. On us, of course."

He pushed a roll of chips across the table to Herschel.

"You want me to play blackjack?" Herschel said. "I hardly even know the rules."

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"We think it would be interesting," the manager said. "A little experiment. Of course, you're under no obligation to accept."

"You think I'll lose?" Herschel asked. "You think I'll blow this money and give you the chance to win back some of yours?"

"No," said the manager. "We rather think you're going to win."

5.

HERSCHEL DID win at blackjack. Also at seven-card stud and several other games. Including his previous winnings, he won over $4 million.

"Can I stop now?" he asked the manager, who had accompanied him on his grand tour of the games.

"Of course," said the manager. "I do believe we've seen enough."

A few minutes later, Herschel was sitting in the manager's office holding a certified check in the full amount.

"Before you go," said the manager, "there is a proposition I would like to make. There is a certain task that needs to be undertaken, and we believe that you are the man for the job."

"Job?" Herschel echoed. He was tired, and his mind was fuzzy. "I already have a job."

"We know that," the manager said. "But this is really more of a short-term assignment. A well-paying one, too. But more than money, I can offer you tremendous intangible rewards. Adventure. Excitement. Glory. A sense of existential meaning."

"Existential meaning?" Herschel gaped at the manager. This was all too weird for him. He wanted to go up to his room and crawl into bed with Marianne. Better still, he wanted to wake her up and pack and drive straight to the airport.

"Mr. Freeman," said the manager. "It is time for us to, as you say here, talk turkey."

He reached up to touch his chin. And then, in a smooth-flowing motion, he pulled off his face.

* * *

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6.

UNDER THE mask, the alien was not so much repulsive as fascinatingly different. He had no ears, but tiny stalks sticking out from the top of his head, which weaved around as he moved his head. The eyes were huge and lidless; the nose was so small as to be almost absent; the mouth was wide and without lips. The skin was blue and scaly, and had no facial hair.

Herschel could not help but stare.

"We," said the alien, "have been looking for someone like you for a long time, on a dozen different planets, and in a hundred different ways."

"We?"

"We are the Vleep, Mr. Freeman. A very old starfaring species from a planet far away. Normally, we make it a rule not to intervene in the affairs of more backward planets, or to make our presence known in any way. But there are exceptional circumstances, which I will now outline."

"But what do you want with me?" Herschel asked. "I'm nobody important. What could I possibly have that you could want?"

"Luck," said the alien.

"Luck?" Herschel echoed.

"Luck. That is what we have been searching for. That is why we opened this establishment, at considerable expense and inconvenience, to screen out individuals with exceptional luck. We have seen some very lucky individuals, but you are by far the luckiest. We believe, in fact, that you may be currently the luckiest being in our galaxy."

"I am on a bit of a streak," Herschel admitted. "But it's just chance; that's all it is. And it could end at any time."

"You're wrong," the alien said. "You humans do not really understand luck at all. Either you look upon it with superstitious awe, or you attempt to explain it away using your primitive mathematics. Our own higher-level psychomathematics reveals the truth of the matter."

"Which is?"

"That luck lies *within* the individual organism, rather than outside it. Basically, luck is the ability to influence the probabilities presenting themselves in your favor. Some individuals can influence them more powerfully than others, just as some have superior musical ability, or the ability to run very fast on two limbs."

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"You're saying that luck is innate to the individual? But I was never this lucky before."

"That's because an organism's luck fluctuates in strength over different phases of its life cycle. Or, as they say here, when you're hot, you're hot. And you, sir, are *very* hot. You are precisely what we are looking for."

"But why? Why would you need someone who is lucky?"

"Because we have so little luck of our own."

"You mean that you're unlucky?"

"No. Not really. Actually, we fall somewhere in between. Only on these more backward planets, among younger species, do we find these extremes in individual luck. We believe that luck is an evolutionary survival mechanism, one eventually bred out of a species when the need for it has passed."

"And yet you do need it now?"

"Yes. You see, we Vleep are at war with a most dangerous enemy. The fate of this very sector of space hangs in the balance. We believe that your remarkable luck can tip that balance in our favor."

The Vleep, the alien explained, were locked in combat with the Werhoona, an exceptionally ambitious competitor in the spacefaring stakes. The Werhoona sphere of influence had ballooned alarmingly, and now impinged in various ways upon the Vleep. It was, as Herschel understood it, essentially a battle for control of markets and trading routes, although he was not sure he understood it very clearly.

"By assisting us in our noble war," the alien said, "you can bring a sense of meaning to your otherwise mundane existence."

"That's all very well," Herschel said. "But this fight has nothing to do with me. How would I know that I would be helping the right side?"

"I could attempt to sway you emotionally," the alien said, "by letting you view pictures of our opponents. You would find them repulsive in the extreme. But in fact, it is their behavior that is utterly reprehensible, and which now poses a terrible threat to your own planet."

"The Werhoona are threatening Earth?"

"Yes. As I said, we Vleep do not typically interfere in the affairs of underdeveloped planets such as your own. But the Werhoona have no such reservations. Currently your planet is protected by the fact that it falls within our sphere of influence. But should we lose this conflict, Earth

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would suffer, too. They would come in here and flood your markets with their cheaply made bric-a-brac, causing great unemployment and suffering."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"You will become our Supreme Commander. You will direct our side of the hostilities, ensuring our final victory over the detestable Werhoona."

"I don't know," Herschel said. "I wouldn't want to be responsible for having anyone killed, or asking people to risk their lives."

"Risk their lives?" the alien said. "What do you take us for?"

7.

AND SO, telling his wife that he had to leave on urgent business, Herschel went off to war.

The war took the form of a series of games, involving some skill but also a considerable measure of luck, played between the Vleep and Werhoona teams. Some of the games were rather complex, but the Vleep used advanced teaching techniques to instill in Herschel the basics.

Herschel did find the Werhoona rather horrendous at first. Essentially overgrown slime molds, they exuded a powerful yeasty smell. But he quickly became used to sitting across the table from them, and in the end came to find the smell rather pleasant.

The game took several weeks, although for Herschel it seemed more like days. He had never felt so keenly alive. Winning money and cars and gourmet ice cream was all very well, but now he was playing for higher stakes.

The Werhoona proved to be worthy opponents, but in the end the luck ran against them.

"It is a great gift, luck," said the Werhoona team leader as they parted for the last time. "Although in some cases a dangerous one."

The remark puzzled Herschel, but only slightly. He was too busy being feted by the Vleep. Rather than returning him to Earth immediately, they insisted on taking him on a victory tour of the Vleep planets, where his contribution was lavishly praised.

"This man," they would say, "has saved the Galaxy from a frightful fate."

Herschel loved to hear this.

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8.

AND THEN one day, climbing up to the speaker's stand at a great public meeting in his honor, Herschel tripped and broke his ankle.

Vleep medical science quickly healed the injury. But Herschel was badly shaken.

"That never happened to me before," he said. "Never."

That night, the dwelling in which he was staying caught fire, although the blaze was quickly controlled.

The next morning there was a small earthquake.

A delegation of Vleep came to his room.

"Mr. Freeman," they said, "there has been a change in plans."

"You mean you're canceling the banquet?" he asked, disappointed. "Is that on account of the earthquake?"

"No, Mr. Freeman. It's because of you."

Hesitantly, regretfully, they explained the situation. Herschel Freeman would remain an honored hero among the Vleep, but it was time for him to return to his own planet. It might, they said, be dangerous for everyone if he remained.

"Why?" he asked.

"It's your luck, I'm sorry to say."

"You mean, it's run out?"

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid," said the leader of the delegation. "I'm afraid it's running rather strongly the other way. Our psychomathematicians could explain this to you better, but it seems you've run through your stock of good luck, and a compensatory reaction is now setting in."

"Compensatory reaction?"

"It's the law of conservation of luck, I'm afraid. Good luck turns to bad. Wonderful luck gives way to absolutely dreadful luck. As they say on your planet, no lunch is unfree."

"But some people have good luck all their lives."

"Yes," said the Vleep, "but that's because they haven't exhausted it yet. Luck is a form of potential, you see, potential energy. Carefully husbanded, it could indeed last a lifetime for a member of a short-lived species like yourself. But I'm afraid you ran through yours rather quickly."

"The games," Herschel said.

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"Yes," said the Vleep. "Your heroic efforts against the Werhoona have entirely depleted you."

"You could have warned me," he said.

"But then you might not have come," the Vleep said, its ear stalks bobbing in agitation. "And we couldn't be sure this would happen. You must see our position. And wasn't it worth it, after all? To save the Galaxy from a frightful fate?"

"I don't know," Herschel said. "That depends on how bad it's going to get."

9.

HE GOT some sense of how bad it might get when he got to the spaceport — the trip was uneventful, although the flying vehicle in which he was traveling hummed and rocked alarmingly — and discovered that he was making the trip back alone in a robotic craft.

"I'd take you back myself," said the Vleep leader, "but I have some pressing engagements. I'm sure you understand."

Despite one near collision with a planetary body, and a bad scare when the life-support system temporarily malfunctioned, Herschel did make it back to Earth in one piece.

Returning home, he found his wife in bed with the man from the pool-cleaning service.

Neither was his job waiting for him.

Shortly afterward, his house caught fire and burned to the ground. The property insurance company holding the policy had gone bankrupt the week before.

His investments went sour. A bank holding much of his personal wealth failed.

He slipped on an icy street and broke his ankle again.

As his money ran out, he took to buying lottery tickets, but he never won.

He took up drinking in a serious way.

* * *

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10.

AFTERWARD IT seemed more and more like a dream, his fantastic run of luck as much as his glorious victory against the Werhoona.

It was a pity, of course, having to use up all his luck like that. But at least it had been in a good cause.

"I've had good times as well as bad times," he would tell the other bums in the flophouse, or whoever else might be willing to listen. "I can't complain. I've had my moments. Moments of existential meaning."

Not too many bums, after all, could claim to have saved the Galaxy from so terrible a fate.

"I'm just having a run of bad luck," he would say. "How long can it last, after all? Fifty, a hundred years? You have to set these things in perspective."

11.

AND THEN one day the Werhoona came to see him.

Despite their awful appearance, he had come to respect the Werhoona in the course of the games, and he was willing to give them a hearing.

They knew, they told him, that he had heard dreadful things about them from the Vleep. But in fact they were just simple merchants, scuffling to earn a living. It was true that, unlike the Vleep, they did trade with underdeveloped planets. But invariably the inhabitants were delighted to buy their wares.

In any case, what was past was past. They had a proposition for him.

"The fact is," they told him, "we need someone who is very unlucky. And your name happened to come up."

12.

IT WAS not exactly a lucky break, Herschel's new job with the Werhoona. The planet was too cold and damp, and he was always contracting respiratory ailments. And the floors of the ambassadorial palace were dangerously slippery. But it beat the flophouse hands down.

The Vleep were horrified to see him back, on their home world at that,

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but protocol did not allow them to refuse a properly accredited ambassador from the Werhoona.

The very first week that Herschel was there, a previously extinct volcano just outside the Vleep capital had a minor blowup, smothering the city under a cloud of fine ash.

"What would it take to make you go home?" they asked, coughing and sneezing and bobbing their ear stalks in distress. "Money?"

"I'd only lose it."

"The love of a good woman?"

"I'd lose that, too."

"What, then?"

"You have to fix my luck," he told them.

"That's impossible," they said.

"Then I'm staying," he said.

13.

TWO MINOR earthquakes, a tidal wave, and several major trading reversals later, they came back to him.

A crash research program, they told him, had resulted in a possibly acceptable solution.

"We can't give you back your good luck," they said. "But we think we can take away the bad. Most of it, anyway."

"Sure," Herschel said, still speaking painfully from the operation to fix three broken teeth from a nasty fall the week before. "It's a deal."

14.

AND SO Herschel went back to Earth, where he was neither especially lucky nor especially unlucky, but instead somewhere in between.

"In a way," he said one day, looking around his modestly furnished living room in his modest three-bedroom house, purchased with his modest middle-management salary, "I'm a very lucky guy."

"Of course you are," said his new wife.

"I've seen the highs; I've seen the lows. But this. . . ."

"This is better?"

"This is fine," he said. "Just fine with me."

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15.

THE ALIEN introduced itself as a Craco.

"We're now in this part of the Galaxy," it said. "But we're going to be big."

The alien had been sitting in the backseat of his car in the parking lot, introducing itself as he pulled out onto the road. Now it flowed over into the front seat, leaving a fine, glistening film behind.

"What we're looking for," it told him, "is a very average sort of guy. Kind of in between. Goes along with his life, nothing much happens, no real high spots or pits of despair. You get the picture?"

Herschel stopped the car.

"Out," he told the alien. "Right now."

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IN THE eye blink of their vanishing through that red chasm, they entered another world and were transformed into different beings.

"He sought out . . . every least fragment of Jeannie's head throughout the car's interior. . . . It was a work of delicate correlations, electrically swift. The . . . tissue shreds each had to be minutely cleansed and neatly relodged in the dense three-dimensional puzzle. . . . When he saw her eyes open and struggle for focus, he was content. . . .

". . . the seam in the skin — crosswise to the esophagus — split cleanly, like withered lips parting. A thinner neck was unveiled within, bristling with black chitinous hairs and barbs. . . . With a glabby friction the empty bag of the old woman's face slid completely off the . . . feeding apparatus, and off the vast compound eyes.

"The voice was gaining distinctness, developing makeshifts for tones lost in the agonal rupturing of the valves and stops of speech, more effectively wrestling vowel and consonant from the putrid tongue and lips. At the same time, the body's crudity of movement did not quite obscure a subtle, incessant experimentation. Fingers flexed and stirred, testing the give of tendons, groping the palm for old points of purchase and counterpressure there. The knees, with cautious repetitions, assessed the new limits of their articulation."

The above is part of a Michael Shea story that never was . . . and yet is. The four paragraphs are taken from four different stories among the seven collected in *Polyphemus*, and I have no doubt it would have been possible to turn the trick with all of them, had my point not been

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sufficiently made.

What is my point? My point is that SF is precisely about that moment in which we enter another world and are transformed into different beings, my larger point is that this is what all of literature is about in some way, and my ultimate point is that Michael Shea knows it. *Knows* it; doesn't concede it may be so, doesn't argue that it may be so, doesn't test whether it is so. All of that is behind him, if there ever was a time he doubted it. Shea writes with the touch of someone who has found the place.

The beautifully made Arkham House book contains, in addition to Shea's work, some excellent illustrations by John Stewart, and a foreword by Algis Budrys. In that introductory essay, you will find lots of my praise for Shea's work, backed up by what I feel are good reasons for it, and I will spare you much repetition of it here. Take it as given, until you get hold of a copy and read it.*

Obviously, I wasn't asked to do the introduction because Arkham's James Turner thought I might not be a Shea fan.# Equally so, I didn't agree to do it because I wanted Shea to become less well appreciated. Why is this?

This is because we need our Sheas very badly, and we need their work collected in volumes.

We also need it published in magazines, of course, and that is why this magazine published six of these stories over the years since 1979. (They are "Polyphemus," "The Angel of Death," "The Horror on the #33," and "The Autopsy," to list the four from which our opening collage was taken, plus "The Extra" and "Uncle Tuggs," and the seventh is "The Pearls of The Vampire Queen," taken from *Nifft the Lean*, the novel for which Shea holds a best-of-the-year "Howard" fantasy award.)

But in addition to the periodical appearances that troll down through the years of reader-awareness, a writer — particularly a writer like Shea —needs to get out in packages that will reside in libraries and book collections, get listed in reference indices, and, especially with a physical package of Arkham quality,

*Or don't read it. Read the stories first, and then if for some reason you feel a need for some species of validation, those my weighty thoughts are there, like an overlooked dumpling at the bottom of the dish. Test it with a cautious fork; considering the context, it might be a dumplingoid.

#I know three entirely distinct people named James Turner, each thoughtful and active in some aspect of the arts. On the other hand, I know no one named Charles Fort, at least not under that name.

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attain to permanence. We need standing evidence — increasingly, we need evidence — that there are still people writing out there who find excellence important.

Despite his Howard, which came as a shock to many people including myself who had never registered the book's stature, and despite the excellence of *Nifft the Lean*, which came as a distinct pleasure to many people, myself included, who then read it, Shea does not yet appear on many lists of first-rank SF authors. But that's clearly where he belongs.

This, by the way, is a strong argument for the validity of the jury-selection system used for its awards by the sponsoring body of the World Fantasy Convention; the book was a DAW original paperback, and, nothing invidious intended re. original paperbacks or DAW's packaging of this particular one, I doubt very much if *Nifft* ever stood a chance of election to a Hugo. Of course, it also didn't get a jury-selected Philip K. Dick Award for best original paperback of the year. This despite the fact that, for instance, Nifft's descent into hell is couched in a scene Dante Allighieri would not have been ashamed of, I know what I'm saying and I kid you not.

Shea is a writer's writer. For instance, this is being written shortly after a convention lunch with Joe Haldeman, and when I mentioned I was next going to the keyboard to review a book by Michael Shea, Haldeman immediately named "The Autopsy" and recounted the significant detail in "The Horror on the #33." I then assumed he'd seen a copy of *Polyphemus*, but not so. The stories had simply stuck in Joe's mind. He also displayed a pretty good familiarity with other landmarks in Shea's career. And I believe he is down in the huckster room this moment, looking for a copy of the book. I cite all this because this is typical; Shea may not be prominent in the consciousness of the general SF-reading populace, but it tends to be a different case among his fellow professionals. In this art, the good ones tend to know who the other good ones are, and to keep track of their progress almost unwittingly but accurately, in the manner of all nocturnal animals.

Speaking of nocturnal animals: From his work, I had pictured a cli- Shea; a bookish type in a tweed jacket, perhaps a little nerdy not to put a fine point on it, taking refuge behind an obviously intense devotion to literacy. Doesn't make him a bad guy; I wrote the foreword anyhow. Then I met him at a convention in Oakland, where, it turns out, Shea was the kind of Irishman who would have gone out in his

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oyster-boat with Jack London, and had done a fair amount of his writing while working as a night clerk in the kind of hotel where the night clerk carries a gun. Despite a career that goes back into the 1970s, Shea is yet young, and for this mercy I am particularly grateful.

Why? And, by the way, what do I mean by "excellence" and "literacy" this time?

I think you either know or I can't explain it; very probably, as an F&SF reader, you know. But I will try to explain.

Putting it cruelly, most of the people who support publishing are people who are most comfortable reading pictographs. If you doubt me, take my job reviewing best-sellers for the Chicago *Sun-Times*. It will shortly become quite clear to you that the overwhelming majority of people who buy books want to buy books written either in Basic English or in homiletic jargon, that they want to visit out-of-town locales but only by guided tour in a sealed vehicle with sun-shaded shatterproof windows, and that the niceties of grammar are wasted on them. A passage such as "The corpse sat up upright and began muttering some words and moving itself around" is not perceived by them as being any different from Shea's treatment of the same event, or is in fact preferable because it is shorter, as well as less involving. These are the people who, despite the fact that their dollars are the essential support of the same establishment that produces books you and I like, love to "read" about people whose lives and characters have no more individuality than the icons on lavatory doors, and whose situations are equally limited.

So it is a mercy that Shea is young and tough; a blue-collar roustabout, by all outward appearances, who has within him the ability to be alert, and the inability not to speak to us about it, despite our outward appearances.

He pays us that respect. "Of *course* you're in there," he says. "Now let me tell you about this fascinating thing that's vitally important to both of us behind our eyes." At Shea's hands . . . at the hands of the few Sheas we ever have at any given time . . . the language comes alive. It comes alive not because words have life. They don't. But it is possible for those alert in life to arrange words so that they address life; though Shea writes ostensibly of death, he knows — he *knows* — that death is only the crucial form of the essential human topic, which is transfiguration.

More and more it seems to me that speculative fiction represents

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our most significant cultural attack on the problem of who we are and what we are supposed to do about it. Some works of "mainstream" fiction — that is, descriptive fiction — have managed over the years to so describe life that the heart thrums to them and useful conclusions can be drawn from them. But it seems to me it takes a truly masterful artist to do this at all, and if it's done *almost* right the result is a pernicious plausibility.

SF by its nature tackles the problem every time out, and even when done by someone with very limited objectives and talents, can't help but trip over something meaningful somewhat more often. We are, mind you, dealing with processes often best summed up by the old Germanic saying: 'Even the blind hog finds its meal.' Furthermore, the search for truth is far from the only objective of any literature, and one should in any case be wary of a state of mind that approaches every piece of art with grim determination. But descriptive fiction tends, exactly, to make the grim assumption that we are supposed to head for *the* tomorrow, which is today with a new coat of paint, which means it claims today is understood beyond question. Looking out my window, I can no longer entertain that proposition, and doubt that I am unique in that feeling.

The pervasive and culturally persistent power of speculative fiction can't be ignored. Quick — name the culture that has no legends, name the culture whose legends do not deal with godhead and the transfiguration of humanity. Which brings us to Charles N. Brown and William G. Contento.

There is no glory for indexers. I have only a faint understanding of what joys might be found in making entry after entry on a stack of file cards or even the computerized equivalent, constantly comparing and re-comparing, waking up with a start in the middle of the night possessed by the certainty — but the undocumented certainty — that one put the entry for Card 109874 on some other card. Certainly there is little immediate reward, because an index gains value as people with memories die off, and some of them are damned slow about it.

But our literature is not only very likely the hope of the world,* it is generally published in smaller quantities than that other stuff, and it is not as much acquired in permanent form in places that are apt to be visited by the next generations of topflight scholars. (And may the starwinds save us from the less-than-topflight scholars. But those are the people who, having not cut

*It isn't!

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Brann must overcome
the powers of an evil sorcerer and the
magic of the gods or all is lost...

Book Two of the *Drinker of Souls* Trilogy

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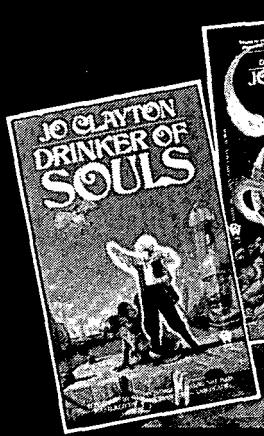
BLUE MAGIC



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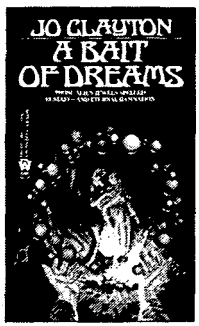

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it where the best-regarded libraries are kept, get bus tickets to troves salted away in academe's equivalent of the Lost Dutchman Mine, and having desperately found it, desperately apply their best thinking to it.)

O.K., simplified picture of the situation. But not necessarily oversimplified. *Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: 1986*, to give it its complete title, is subtitled "A Comprehensive Bibliography of Books and Short Fiction Published in the English Language," and that is what it is. Bald statement conceals staggering research load, risk by publisher Brown to the point where the term "community service" springs to mind, immense accessibility to data stored therein.

Books are indexed by author, and then by title. There is a list of 1986 original publications. Then there is a subject list, beginning with science fiction novels, then fantasy novels, then horror novels, then novelizations, YA books, compilations, periodicals, works of reference to which the scholar might further turn, then art books, associational works, and, of course, Miscellaneous, which includes such things as Donald Palumbo's *Eros in The Mind's Eye* and Leon L. Gamell's *The Annotated Guide* to Startling Stories. After which come the author and title lists for short works, followed by listings of all the stories (!) contained in the above-noted compilations (!). After which this 8 1/2 x 11" book of well over 350 pages trails off into another half-inch of merely invaluable lesser stuff.

Well bound, on good paper, this volume, unlike some earlier Contento indices, is now not obviously computer printout, but instead presents a fully typeset appearance, in well-designed and -sized characters. Not that similar books from years of lesser technology were that hard to read, but this one is notably easy.

Budrys test: In this book, I discovered that someone has reprinted a story of mine without permission, payment, or even an author's copy. I am gonna *get* that slug, and Thank You Charlie and Bill.

I would have liked and admired this book in exactly the same terms had I not made that latter discovery in the last stages of keyboarding this review. But it just goes to show you, Mister Slug . . . truth is power, as will be demonstrated.

Over to you, Scott:

* * *

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Jack the Giant Killer, Charles de Lint (Ace Fantasy, Cloth, 202 pp, $16.95)

TO KILL a giant, it takes a Jack — a trickster, whose luck and pluck are enough to win a victory where magic and strength would surely fail. Only this time there's no beanstalk, and the setting isn't jolly old England. The story takes place in modern Ottawa — or at least it starts there — and it isn't Jack this time, but Jacky, a young woman whose lover has just rejected her because she is, alas, too *dull*.

In a paroxysm of self-hatred she hacks off the long blond hair she hasn't cut since childhood. It's only the beginning of her self-transformation. Wandering into a park at night, she sees a group of bikers on Harleys surround a little fellow and blast him to death with some kind of light. All that's left of him is a red cap. When she puts it on, she can see the world of Faerie, which exists right amid the quotidian Ottawa that everyone else can see.

An old house, when seen in Faerie, is the Gruagagh's Tower. Some ugly street people, seen truly, turn out to be hideous bogans. Jacky herself becomes something else again in this deadly and exquisite world — a courageous, foolhardy, and unbelievably lucky hero with a role to play that far transcends anything that her old boyfriend dreamed of.

The power of de Lint's contemporary fantasy is that it never wholly leaves the real world — it enriches it. He doesn't have to go somewhere else to find magic. Instead he makes Ottawa itself into a magical place, and ordinary people into heroes without making them forsake the familiar world. Marred only by a long expository lump early in the book, *Jack the Giant Killer* is a lively, lovely retelling of some of the best tales out of faerie. And, like all good fairy tales, it works as well for children as for adults. De Lint is no longer a "promising" fantasy writer. He's a damn good one.

The Heavenly Horse From the Outermost West, Mary Stanton (Baen Books)

We usually think of talking-animal stories as "children's" literature. Beatrix Potter. Thornton W. Burgess. *The Wind in the Willows. Winnie the Pooh.* Cute. But not serious. Not adult.

Think again. Take for instance,

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Bambi. Not the Disney *Bambi*, with cute little Thumper and Flower the skunk. I mean Felix Salten's grim and exalting novel *Bambi*, with death and terror and love and coming of age. The animals talk, yes, but we know that the dialogue is what they *would* say, if they could only make language.

Mary Stanton's new fantasy is about talking horses. OK? They stand in their stalls and have conversations. The farm dog makes rounds and brings them news; the barn cat is selfish and smarmy and funny. There's a dumb horse and a catty horse and a young mare who has become hostile through mistreatment, but now stands on the brink of a marvelous destiny.

This is not idle whimsy. Stanton is working within the Felix Salten tradition. Her horses don't wear human clothing — they live like horses, in stalls, fearful of human beings yet also willing to trust and even love us. They worship gods, they have prophets and dreamers, they have aspirations that may or may not conflict with the necessity of living under the domination of human beings.

The result is a surprisingly powerful fantasy, one that is true to the nature and lives of horses and yet reveals much about human nature. Stanton writes with a sure hand, so I can promise that you will be entertained. There are visions and wonders, the stuff of dreams and nightmares.

But I don't recommend the novel to you merely as a divertissement. As the mares and stallions of this novel act and react to events both great and small, one can't help but pick up a subliminal message — that what we conceive of as our own "rational" behavior is also animal behavior, and as likely to be driven by animal needs as any act of so-called brute beasts. *We* are also talking animals.

A Truce With Time, Parke Godwin (Bantam Spectra, 320 pp, $16.95)

This novel is not Parke Godwin's usual offering. Instead of high fantasy, we have a contemporary ghost story — a haunting, anyway — that takes place in Manhattan among a group of artistically-minded people who are on the cusp between being middle-aged and being old. It has the feel of a personal memoir — a tale of people that Godwin knows and loves. The result is a quiet, real, but sometimes over-detailed book, at once blessed and cursed with earnestness. As in a conversation late at night with a good friend, I sometimes found that my attention wandered, and after a while I grew weary; but I was always glad for the company.

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Glasnost, summits, arms control — if this goes on, will it mean the end of the cold war spy thriller? Here is a decidedly off-trail contribution to the genre, concerning a Soviet mole in Brooklyn . . .

The Prince of the Steppes

By Barry N. Malzberg

THERE ARE THOSE who say Yuri Semeyonvich Tomavechki is in favor of continued entrapment of Western nations, but it is a lie, is a wholesale misrepresentation, is a — I try to put this in your rhetoric — terrible contravention of the truth. Yuri Semeyonvich Tomavechki — difficult name, unassimilable name to be reduced to "Simon" within course of these remarks — is in favor of free nations, free commerce, free exchange of information, materials, goods and goddesses through all the spaces of Western and Eastern culture. With exchange, with free passage of goods, comes comity, comes understanding, comes rapprochment of the nations, not to say era of peace and justice to be ushered at beginning of millennium, thank you very much, good wishes are shared.

Yuri Semeyonvich Tomavechki, known as Simon in memoir, great believer in social justice. Now telepathic spy burrowed deep in regions of Red Hook, Brooklyn, in disguise of wholesale capitalist taxi driver ferrying Western capitalists from one destination to the next, food stamp

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center to Sparkle City, grand mall to Crossroads of World, Yuri sit down deep in cab, crunch in front seat of medallion #367846 New York Taxi & Limousine Commission, think deep thoughts, carry impressions to heart of secret offices in Moscow where hidden masters transmit Western impulses into code, transfer to office of premier code references to grant insight into decadent practices of long-surpassed West.

Fall of West of no interest to Simon. Simon interested only in fulfilling mission in Flatlands and Red Hook sections of Brooklyn, New York, returning to Moscow, assuming position of quiet, assimilated worker amongst workers of state. Telepathy an unbidden ability, an unshared gift; Simon turn off telepathy upon return to Moscow, live in dignity and simplicity. Simon does not *want* telepathy; does not want to tune into girl companion as put hopeful hand on upper breast, hear girl companion say in mind, "What is this?", or, "I give this five more minutes and then I lie down," or, "How many rubles in long run is worth this?", or, "Simon, he beautiful creature; I transfer hand soon to *lower* breast." Simon, twenty-nine years old, prefer uncertainties, prefer little possibilities and mysterious to evidence given by telepathic gift. Simon long embarrassed by share of consciousness given by gift, embarrassed, too, by unbidden emergence that takes him so conclusively to Brooklyn Western capitalist state. Simon, mind open now, will close mind in Moscow, never open again.

Simon, digressing, drives his cab up and down Flatbush Avenue seeking "fare." "Fare" Simon seeks is specific; this not random chase but specific, known goal, appear for casualness and hope to evade Western police not yet aware (it is hoped) of telepathic spy. "Fare is Elena Wresicwz Theveya — abbreviate in memoir to "Elena" — cousin of famous defected scientist now defected to Los Angeles, defected scientist cousin Nicholas known to be inventor of D-Bomb, dangerous secrets, more dangerous than is ever known. Feared give secret to warmongering Western interests in Los Angeles. Elena, known contact in Red Hook, in Brooklyn, has access to famous Nicholas, knows, it is suspected, of famous Nicholas plans. Short-range telepath Simon (range no good beyond thirty feet — it is unfortunate, it is loss, but such is pathos of Simon range; otherwise, Nicholas be long since investigated) to find Elena as "fare" in Flatbush section, Brooklyn, drive Elena to constant destination, capitalist Wall Street pig place where is junior trainee and plumb unconscious for thoughts. Con-

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tact with Nicholas? Possession of plans? Passage of plans from Nicholas to dangerous Western agents ready to employ D-Bomb? Or Nicholas innocent of warlike intention; simply living in Los Angeles, cooperating with cinema to be made of his life, cinema rights purchased by famous director? All to be resolved by Simon, telepathic spy hunched over wheel of defunct Checker 1972 taxi sedan, scanning heart of Brooklyn, looking for "fare." OFF-DUTY sign twinkling above roof. Elena soon to emerge from hovel, to look for taxiist to take to Wall Street pig place, Simon slyly positioned for pickup. Plan worked out with secret office supervisors in Moscow, contact with Elena to be useful — if useful enough, terminate assignment, return small apartment Moscow, pick up worker's life in quiet worker's way, telepathic access closed off. Live quietly once more. Such is plan.

Is big plan, hah. Is demonstration of futility of human effort, just as Western philosophy says. Practical workers philosophy say life is meaningful, is not cluttered with purposes of disaster, but practical workers philosophy in this case wrong; despairing decadent philosophy of West is right.

Big plan, hah! Return to quiet life in Moscow, hah! Learn secrets of Nicholas and repent of admission of telepathy, hah!

Simon learn intricacies of Western thought, Western possibility. Simon to be plunged into world, as is said, of guilt and sorrow like world banishment of which is predicted by Lenin, other grand figures, other figures of belief and subsistence and trust.

PICKING UP Elena no problem. Cruise back, cruise forth, wait, be waited, show gay, show abandon, be patient. At length, Elena, just like girl in good modern photograph in wallet that have for study, emerge for taxi coming from hovel, stand patient in street. Ignore one waving arm, two buses, three crosswise cyclists with packages, and arrive at curbside, signaling to Elena is available. Is cab at service. Telepathic spy ready to drain mind of all secrets about D-Bomb cousin, Nicholas, report secrets to headquarters, embark upon path of retaliation against decadent culture that would employ such D-Bomb secrets? Of this, Elena knows nothing. Depth of travesty is this: no one knows. To the best knowledge, am only telepathic spy. No other telepath on either side of cold war, not Western or Eastern bloc in all of these centuries. Only telepath to emerge Simon, and he not emerge either if keep big mouth

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shut when red-cheeked schoolboy in classroom on Lenin Boulevard. Keep big mouth shut is Western expression, if not Western trait; not keeping mouth shut put Simon in cab in Red Hook, Brooklyn, disguised as industrious immigrant taxi driver. Elena, in backseat, looks at back of neck of industrious immigrant and says, "Thirty Pearl, and quickness, please; am late." She had slight and delightful accent, although emigrated many years before Simon. Twelve years in country, for Elena, now twenty-seven, came on special visa with family when just sprouting breasts, as Americans say. "Must get there quickly," Elena says.

Sturdy industrious immigrant shrugs, puts Checker in drive gear, presses on accelerator, and moves past Nevins Street. It is short way to Manhattan Bridge, then short on bridge to Canal, then short again south to capitalist pig district where Pearl located, so must use telepathic gifts, must push hard. Push hard, then, at short, satisfactory range against mind of girl in backseat, plumbing for special news. Traffic, dogs, indigent citizens scatter on Flatbush Avenue before me as I concentrate outer eye on evasion, inner eye on Elena. "Ah," Elena says. "Ah yes." At hint of invasion, mind reflexively contracts, leading often to *ah* sound, sometimes *eeh* sound, even gulp of insult, small, controllable epileptic fit. Is harmless, and amnesia always in wake of probe, so there is no concern. Amnesia will be total. Sturdy immigrant pushes hard against blonde mind of pretty assimilated defector in backseat, and mind rears up in response, one by one disgorges all of its secrets, tilts like cornucopia and tumbles all of secrets into mind of Simon, which eagerly receives. Like sex but reversal, man mind take while female mind give. Simon not obsessed with sex, too much product of controlled environment, telepathic gift, tensions of state to be much concerned with sex, but Simon know value of metaphor, too, as secrets pour in.

Simon, arm on steering wheel, keen Soviet reflexes attendant to twitches in traffic, approaches bridge while fascinated, absorbing information . . . mind of Elena slides information *chuck-chuck* into telepathic spy.

D-Bomb not spurious, Simon finds; also, Nicholas releasing plans to chairman Department of Mathematics at state university branch in northern California. Chairman plant of capitalist intelligence agency, who, in guise of friendship and comity, has learned D-Bomb information from Nicholas in guise of salving conscience. Nicholas, racked and tor-

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tured by solitariness of possession of absolute weapon, does not know what to do. In seeking advice, confides to chairman, who is conduit to center of capitalist power in Washington.

D-Bomb plans already known to Washington.

All of this apparent, tilted into mind of Simon, because Elena is Washington contact, is in closest collaboration with center of power. Is so, this, because Elena is using contact with cousin, confidentiality of correspondence, atmosphere to trust, to cajole uncle to release D-Bomb secret to secret intelligence officer at Department of Mathematics. Reason for this is that Elena has promised, will promise, has had sexual congress with much older cousin (age fifty-four) Nicholas. All of this — images of congress, too — pour into eager but shocked mind of Simon, who almost hits Doberman pinscher and aged owner at Henry Street, inferring this information. Images of congress so bright as to be stunning; Simon no fool, no latecomer to arena of sexual connection, nonetheless shocked, discombobulated by implication. D-Bomb secrets well advanced in quarters capable of rapid and ominous advancement, Simon infers as Doberman drags owner to safety and Elena, grunting *eeh*, falls out of telepathic contact by virtue of fainting, of collapsing to floor of Checker 1972 discontinued model.

Fainted passenger in car, dangerous information in mind, telepathic spy disguised as hardworking, dedicated family-devoted immigrant drives over Manhattan Bridge thinking of dangerous nature of subject and appeal.

Conveyance of information, hah! And yet, hah again! If Simon turns over this information to proper controlling source — who is, forgot to mention, dispatcher in guise of Pole at cab company that Simon serves —return to Moscow will be much accelerated but not in fashion Simon will want. Interrogations, delays, possibilities of angst and anomie will be almost limitless as interrogators, in Soviet style, take appallment at messenger of humble but dangerous news.

At Pearl Street, then, Simon has decision to make. Elena has recovered from aspects of telepathic drain; is sitting poised and uneasy on rear seat of cab, somewhat ill at ease but nonetheless willing to confront training program in debentures and long-term conversion bonds to better of ability, Elena seeking revenge upon difficult childhood and rage at Soviet

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Union by seeking capitalist skill (telepathy has revealed). She reaches into pocketbook with industrious hands, looking at me appraisingly. Does not see tortured eyes, does not see truly chiseled artistic features or telepath's pain and knowledge, but only hat, clothes, facade of hardworking immigrant. "You may keep the change," she says, while fumbling for bill they call *tenner*. "What a speedy trip! I never had such a fast trip. I must have slept. I remember nothing of it."

Flocks of walkers, to say nothing of oppressive sight of tall buildings, have us momentarily pinned, locked in place. "No," I say, "payment is not necessary."

"Not necessary?"

"We have business more urgent," I say, "business that exceeds payment of fare. You must take me at once to your cousin, Nicholas."

She stares at me. It is impossible with limited descriptive powers, power of distraction, to indicate kind of stare or what effect this has had upon her, upon me. This is unexpected speech of strange, industrious immigrant Checker cab driver found on Flatbush Avenue and now on Pearl Street. "Who *are* you?" she says. "Who are — ?"

"Is no time," I say. "Is no time for all of that. Must see Nicholas, inventor of D-Bomb, persuade him of error of his ways before all plans released to dangerous chairman and construction of bomb begins, thus ending life for all on planet. To give this information to government at this time utterly disastrous; you and I will be in cell in Moscow in twelve hours with roaches for partners and nothing to discuss. We must go to Los Angeles at once," I say. "*At once*. There is no time for cajolement, no time for whisperings of credibility and certainty; it is essential you accept. You accept? We take cab to airport of Kennedy right now, purchase budget-buster waitaround standby emergency fare, and we go out to Los Angeles at once."

Of nature of response, I cede moment. Is impossible within compass to explain conversation. Elena stares with wonderment, incites with passion, talks with rage, gasps with shock, but cab already on move from Pearl Street, heading toward airport of Kennedy, secure doors locked from front seat as is provided in special bulletproof vehicle reserved by Pole for Simon his own duties. Conversation does not lead to cooperation, not all the way, but in nature of such conversations assisted by years of experience interrogation at better hands than these, credibility is accomplished.

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"Was your mistake leading Nicholas to cooperate," I say. "Was your reason to sit on Nicholas, to refuse. Now you make big problem, you make possible imminence of descent of all civilization if prognosticative powers do not fail." Prognostication is not allied with telepathic gift, but Elena at this point ready to accept that assurance.

Elena, by time of arrival at airport of Kennedy, is ready to accept almost anything at all. Elena's acceptance is no encouragement to Simon's modesty, however. Simon properly, expeditiously, refuses further telepathic investigation of Elena consciousness, Simon believing in essential privacy and integrity of human condition.

TELEPATHIC POWERS do not assure prognostication is true, but do have mildly telekinetic, transportational, directional powers. Utilized in expeditious way, enable us to: a) leave Checker in inconspicuous place without penalty, b) find a way to budget-buster emergency standby line front at once through exercise of powerful influence and sudden somnolence of those in preceding part of line, c) ensure sufficient sickness on part of booked passengers to guarantee all standby admissions. Soon Elena and I are on Delta Air budget-buster seats flight 807, winging our way to Los Angeles, seated and sipping drinks of various alcoholic content, while Simon, no slave of circumstance he, resolves to tell Elena everything. Reasons for flight. Reasons for assumption of knowledge. Even reason for knowing of sexual contact between fifty-four-year-old cousin and twenty-seven-year-old teenage defector now studying debentures. "How dare you —," Elena says, but then full import of talent — also air pockets — hit her, and turbulence causes sudden cessation of conversation. Would be possible to go on with all further exchanges — shared memories of Moscow, shared memories of childhood of approximately same generation, even beginning of yielding by Elena — but is not necessary under the circumstances. Say that by flight's end — I risk one quick, harmless but revealing probe — Simon has replaced Nicholas, at least in part, as object of sexual fantasy.

We deplane, as expression goes, and find ourselves in airport of L.A.-Extension, even more bewildering than place of Kennedy. We do this, we do that, telekinesis showing itself once again of mild usage. In rental car, Elena's credit information having worked its informational wonders, Simon driving once again but Elena in front seat now, we are soon enough in

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quiet town of Tarzana, where Nicholas resides with many textbooks and lustful intent. "We must come upon him unwarned," I have said to Elena. "Is vital that there be no prior discussion; we do not have time." After six hours of my suasion and emolumentary discussion, she has agreed. There is no resistance left in sexually fantasizing Elena. We enter upon pink-and-white building of sort clung to by immigrants and actors of Moscow Art Theatre, and on fourth floor — Simon accelerates narrative, but it is important to say end of world looms if experiments not instantly cessation, and acceleration is only comprehensible course — pound on apartment of Nicholas. Elena clings to elbow as Simon heroically pounds. Simon pounds like heroic worker, like troops in *Alexander Nevsky*. Door is suddenly pulled off, rotten on hinges; from door emerges face. Face bright with mustache, with damp sweats.

"This is not Nicholas," Elena says.

I know this already. Nicholas image has been plucked from unconscious of disgorging telepathized Elena. This is something else with face of commissar, face of all faces I have seen in a hundred dreaming nights, face I have always expected —

"Come in, Yuri Semeyonvich Tomavechki," face says, and enormous arms, perhaps connected to another body, reach forward, impel humble form into apartment, Elena shambling in thereafter, yank humble form to attentive posture while behind is deadly sound of Elena's laughter, now bubbling as in recollected secret sexual encounter with Nicholas recorded in memories once extracted so recently. Elena laughs and laughs.

"Ah, Yuri Semeyonvich," commissar with face like dreams says, that face enormous, leaning over, "do you think, do you really think, we let telepathic spy alone, uncontrolled, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, to work will without control?"

Laughter and laughter. Simon has nothing to state; stating seems beyond him. Room seems full of laughter; Simon, even in his distress, is convinced that he is not alone.

"*Short range is short fool!*" commissar says; "*D-Bomb is big, big range!*" — and claps Simon on shoulder, drags Simon in nearer and nearer, laughing. Elena laughing, too, all of capitalist and Eastern culture laughing together; while over in corner, Simon sees Nicholas, man he recognizes from Elena unconscious as Nicholas, crouching over plans, rubbing hands on plans, laughing over plans, laughing and laughing, as ever so subtly,

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ever so suddenly, curtain of civilization seems to come down on scene; and soon enough, Simon, in extreme distress, finds it possible to see no more. Simon feels intense explosive fires building within, feels himself — presence of attractive, seductive Elena not necessity for perpetration of this powerful longing — on verge of explosion of extinguishing force.

Simon observes as if from great distance commissar and Nicholas exchange look of penetrating intelligence, look that Simon seems to recall from Moscow dreams, Moscow nights, Leningrad possibilities and conferences. "Now?" commissar says to Cousin Nicholas. "Right now?"

"Now," Cousin Nicholas says with distinct lilt, lilt to voice resemblance to that in voice of Boris Godunov before deposed czar in famous opera by drunkard Myssorgsky go tumbling down steps to bowels of Hell. "Now," repeats Nicholas.

Simon feels pain that is that of comprehension, feels himself on verge of awful insight, tries to push away, but insight comes nevertheless. Simon understands in a suddenness what has happened to him.

"Is on schedule," Elena says. Her face is masked, traitorous, her voice cool and appraising. Passion seems to be left on budget-buster flight; is no passion in this face. "Arm him now," she says to Cousin Nicholas, who winks at her.

"Is already armed," Nicholas says, to obvious satisfaction of commissar.

Inference not sufficient here; decadent Western literature demands — unlike progressive Soviet worker-oriented literature — that explanations be made, explicitness be accomplished, in last moments before night of many suns, Yuri Semeyonvich Tomavechki — last known as "Simon," herewith to be known as Archangel of Soviet Power — will cause to explain, let reader in on secret, on terrible process.

"Is accomplished well," commissar is saying, "but is not of a certainty yet; produce proof of the arming." Elena reaches forth, grasps invidious infamous telepathic spy Simon in enormous and clutching hold. Explanation to follow.

Here is explanation: is trigger. Is all scheme to trigger. Is gathering of many forces in Los Angeles, is the use of Elena in her hot-bloodedness to entrap the naive and haplessly hot-blooded Simon, is the creation of imposter-Nicholas as necessary third force.

"Boom!" says first agent, pointing.

"Boom!" says second agent.

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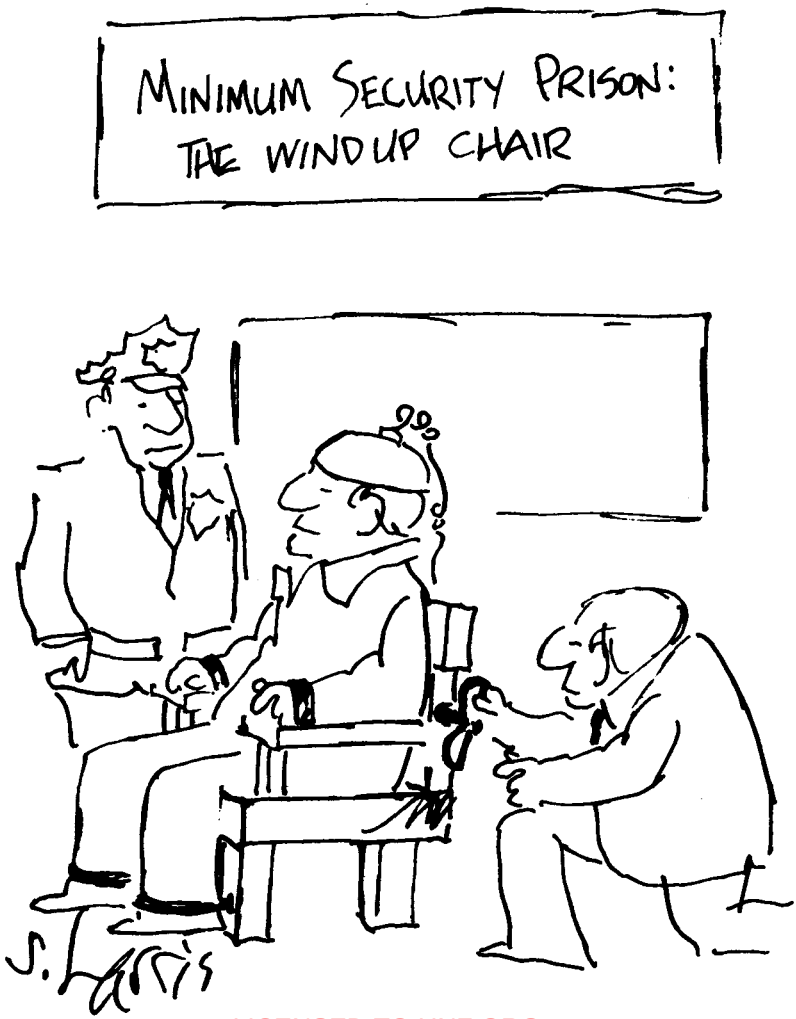
Third agent, working quickly on Simon, has no time for such mockery or commentary, being busily engaged. "Assembly completed," agent now says, "Like false czar, is waiting."

Simon himself is D-Bomb.

D-Bomb to go off at convenience.

Later, not so much later: bing-bam.



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This is Paul Wilson's first F&SF story, however he has been writing SF since the early 1970's, and his fantasy/horror novels THE KEEP and THE TOMB both made the NY Times *paperback bestseller list. "Muscles," he writes, "recalls the Times Square of my adolescence, when the sleaze seemed more on the naughty side. . ."*

Muscles

By F. Paul Wilson

HE WAS DRY. His mind was a vast open plain, barren of the slightest sprig of an idea. It worried him no little bit.

Jay finished his coffee and sandwich at his desk, then sat there tapping a pencil on his blotter. He looked around the empty office. This was getting serious. He needed a lead story for next week's edition, and he was completely blank.

He picked up the current issue of the *Manhattan Investigator* lying open on his desk, exposing the weekly eye injury on page three. That was one of his rules: Every issue had to have an eye injury on page three, preferably with a photo. Page five was reserved for the weekly UFO story. The dependable appearance of features like those kept the regulars coming back week after week. But it was page one that caught the impulse buyers, and they were the gravy. He closed it over and scanned the front page.

FOUND IN SIBERIA:

TWO-HEADED BABY SPEAKS ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN!

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There followed an eyewitness account of the left head speaking Russian and the right head answering in English (talk about internationalism!), along with a photo of a two-headed baby from the freak file.

Jay frowned. Another of his rules was that freaks were a last resort for the front page. The fact that this week's lead was about a freak was testimony to the aridity of his current dry spell. But you had to go for the gross when you were competing against something as juicy as the Profumo scandal in the dailies.

He got up and walked around the tiny office. He stopped at the front page of the March 15, 1959, issue that was framed on the wall. He had only started with the *Manhattan Investigator* then, but he had made his mark with that one. Even today, it was still considered a masterpiece.

Secret Vatican papers reveal:

RICHIE VALENS WOULD HAVE BEEN NEXT POPE

He shook his head at the memory. Boy, had that ever sold papers! The text had been the usual bullshit about secret information leaked by a deep contact who would talk only to the *Manhattan Investigator*. A source in a place like the Vatican was a safe bet because the Vatican was so secretive anyway and would naturally be expected to deny a story like that. Of course, the old standby was anywhere behind the Iron Curtain. No way anyone could prove you right or wrong when the story came from Siberia.

Look at me! he thought. Standing here reminiscing about 1959 like it was the good old days. Hell, it was only four years ago! He was acting like a has-been at thirty!

He needed some air, a walk, a change of scenery. Anything but these lousy walls. He pulled on his coat and headed for the elevator. He knew where he wanted to go.

Ah, sleaze. There was something in the air here in Times Square that did something for Jay. Not any one particular thing. The amalgam stimulated him — a benny for his soul. And the Square looked especially sleazy today, buffeted by a chill wind under a low gray sky that promised rain or snow or a mix.

He wandered past the Tango Palace ("Continuous Dancing from 2 P.M. to 4 A.M. to the Type of Music You Love/Presenting Beautiful Girls to Dance With"), and past the Square Theatre showing a double bill of *The Immoral Mr. Teas* and *Wild Women of Wongo*, and the Garden Theatre with a double of *B-O-I-N-N-N-G!* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bares*,

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and past Hubert's Museum and Flea Circus. He had been to the Tango Palace a number of times — through the plain door and up the stairs to where the music was not the type he loved and neither were the women —and had seen the movies twice each and knew the attractions of Hubert's by heart. But he never got tired of the aura of the Square. The regulars here were living by their wits on the edge of the law, on the far side of truth, justice, and the American way. The skells, the sky-grifters, the street-hawkers and street-walkers all worked as hard at their trades as any straight, but they didn't want it straight. They wanted it their way. Jay could not deny a feeling of kinship.

Lighted headlines were crawling around the Times Building — something about Kennedy and Khrushchev. A guy in cowboy boots and a Stetson was giving Jay the eye. Jay ignored both. A lot of women had told him he looked like Anthony Perkins, and maybe it was true. He was tall, very slim, had dark brown hair and an angular face. The look was useful in attracting women, but it had its drawbacks in the fact that it attracted certain men, too. It also had proved a little unpopular a couple of years ago when *Psycho* was such a hit.

Jay crossed the street and slowed when he came to Harold's Mondo Emporium. There was a small crowd of about half a dozen guys filing by a ticket window. Harold's Mondo was a relative newcomer on the Square, a smaller, poor man's version of Hubert's Museum and Flea Circus. Hubert's had been on the Square since 1929. Ernie Rawson had opened up Harold's just last year. He had sounded like he was going under when Jay had spoken to him a couple of weeks ago. Now he was going like gangbusters with the lunchtime crowd.

Jay showed his press card to the ticket girl and wandered inside to look around. Same old junk as Hubert's: a taxidermied two-headed cow, a snake charmer, a belly dancer, pickled punks (the trade's charming name for bottled embryos — twenty-five dollars each from Del Rio, Texas), a closed-off section with a separate admission that, if Jay remembered correctly, had housed "Sexology" lectures by a professor from the Sorbonne (uh-huh) the last time he was in. Now it said simply, "Supergirl." That was where everyone was going.

Jay spotted Ernie and came up behind him.

"I'm from DC Comics," he said in a gruff voice. "Where can I find the owner of this establishment?"

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Ernie whirled, wide-eyed, then laughed. "Jay! How goes it?" He was a plump, stubby man with a cigar jammed into a corner of his mouth. He was grinning like an idiot.

"You look like a man who just won the Irish Sweepstakes, Ernie. What's going on?"

"Great new attraction! Wanna see 'uh?"

Jay tried to appear disinterested, but he had been hoping for an invitation. "All right. Maybe there's a story in her."

"Is dere ever! See 'uh first, den I'll tell yiz."

He stood in the back with Ernie and watched this Supergirl. She had curly red hair; fair, lightly freckled skin; and she was *built*, not just in her D-cup halter, but in her shoulders, arms, and legs. Muscles. This girl was loaded with them. And her skimpy two-piece Supergirl costume showed them all. Not bulging bodybuilder-type muscles, but thick, sleek cords running under the skin. She was oiled like the Mr. Universe guys so that the light played off all the highlights when she flexed. She was good, too. She knew how to work the crowd. She'd smile, banter, do her lifts, bend her bars. She'd been around. It could have all been an elaborate scam, but the guys in the crowd didn't seem to mind. Just looking at her was worth the ticket price.

"Here comes da blowoff," Ernie said. "Wait'll yiz see dis!"

It was good. Supergirl pulled a drape off a pressing bench, got two medium-sized volunteers from the audience, and had them each sit on an end of an iron bar supported over the bench. When they were set, she lay back on the bench (with her crotch toward the audience, natch) and bench-pressed the two guys. As the audience went wild, Ernie pulled Jay outside.

"She terrif, or what?"

"She's good, all right," Jay said. "But there's not much of a story in a strongwoman act."

"Don't count on dat. Wait'll yiz hear about 'uh gettin' raped tree years ago."

"Raped?" This was getting interesting now. Jay couldn't imagine anyone doing anything to that lady without her permission. "Who did it — Man Mountain Dean?"

"A ghost, she said. An' anyways, she weren't musculuh back den. Maybe you seen 'uh at Hubert's. She was da snake dancer back in '60."

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"Tell you the truth, Ernie," Jay said, "I didn't get much of a look at her face." Those muscles had fascinated him. He'd never seen anything like them on a woman before . . . the way they moved under her skin. . . . "But what's this about a ghost raping her?"

"Dat's what she said back den. Hollered about it to da cops, den clammed up soon as da papers came sniffin'. Quit 'uh job an' disappeared. Couple of weeks ago she shows up in my office wit all dese muscles an' dis act. I mean, is she dynamite or what? And if you give me some good press on 'uh, I can up da ticket price and still be packin' 'em in. And should dat come to be da case, I'd be willing to maybe find a way to —"

Jay held up a hand. "Don't say it, Ernie. Either the story's worth writing or it's not." He had his journalistic integrity.

"O.K, O.K. Just meet 'uh an' talk to 'uh an' see whatcha tink."

"Will do. Which way to the dressing room?" Jay was looking forward to this.

Now that she was swathed in a terry cloth bathrobe, Jay realized that she was kind of pretty. Not beautiful, but pretty in a girlish, nice-smile way. She was pushing thirty, maybe a little hard around the edges, but there was a trace of vulnerability in those blue eyes that appealed to Jay. He wanted to get to know her.

"Dis is Jay," Ernie said. "He's a reportuh. Wants a few woids."

She gave Jay an appraising look. "As long as it's only words he wants; otherwise, the two of you can take off."

Jay smiled at her. "Just words, I assure you, Miss . . . ?" He curved the end of the word up into a question.

"Hansen." She returned the smile. "Olivia Hansen. You can call me Liv."

She seemed interested. Maybe she liked skinny guys.

"I wancha ta give him a good story, Liv," Ernie said. "About da rape an' evryding."

Suddenly the smile disappeared. Liv's expression became fierce. She lifted Ernie off the floor by his lapels and tossed him against the wall.

"I told you never to mention that!" she shouted as Ernie bounced off the wall and cowered away from her. "Didn't I? *Didn't* I?"

"Yeah, Liv, but —"

"No buts!" She turned toward Jay. "What paper you from?"

"The *Manhattan Investigator.*"

"Oh, that's great! Just great! 'Flying Saucer Men Stick Needles in Wom-

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an's Eyes!' I can't stand it!" She snatched a beige raincoat off a hook and pulled it over the robe. "You really are low, Ernie."

"Where y' goin'?" Ernie said as she headed for the door.

"None of your business!"

"You got a two o'clock show!"

"I'll be back."

And then she was gone.

"She betta come back," Ernie said, squaring his shoulders inside his rumpled jacket and trying to look like he was really the boss. He smiled wanly at Jay. "Dey all tink dey're staws."

Jay nodded absently. He was thinking. He gauged Ernie's weight at a compact 170. Liv had handled him easily.

"Strong girl."

"Yeah," he said, smoothing his lapels.

"She coming back?"

"Sure. She always goes out between shows." He sighed. "I tink da broad's a man-hatuh. She got 'uh share of stage-door Johnnies, an' I see 'uh go off wit one from time to time, but dey neva come back. Probly a dyke."

Jay thought about those muscular arms and legs wrapped around another woman . . . what a waste.

"But look," Ernie was saying. "Tonight's 'uh oily night. She's troo at eight-toity, Whyncha come back den an' —"

Jay shrugged. "I don't see much of a story here, Ernie. Sorry."

"Maybe I can talk to 'uh, make 'uh come aroun'."

"Sure, Ernie. Let me know." He waved good-bye.

Jay headed up to 42nd Street and followed it east to the Daily News Building. He checked the morgue files for stories about a "ghost rape." Sure enough, there it was. A little story in the lower left corner of page six. Olivia Hansen's name in print, but no direct quotes. The story looked like it was culled from a police report. Jay thought of Olivia up on that stage with those sleek, shining muscles and felt a growing arousal. He idly wondered if maybe he had some fruity tendencies that muscles could get to him like this, but reminded himself that they were on a woman. That was the important thing. A *good-looking* woman. With muscles. . . .

Back to the files. He checked back a few more years and found two other similar reports: another "ghost rape" and a "monster rape." Both in the Times Square area.

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The juices began flowing as he headed for the street. By the time he reached his office, he was excited. He had his story: Something prowled Times Square at odd intervals, ravaging women. Its victims said it was hideous, ghostlike. What was it? A man? Or something else? Was it perhaps the living excrescence of all the sleaze, disease, perversion, and depravity of Times Square? The embodied concentrate of the lost hopes, shattered dreams, wretched, wrecked lives of those who haunted the Square?

"Oooh, that sounded *good!* And it wasn't so farfetched, was it? After all, the White House had been occupied by an Irish Catholic for the past couple of years. What could be more farfetched than that?

The readers would eat it up! All he needed was that final touch to give it the needed ring of authenticity that would enable him to drag it out for two or three issues — personal testimony. He needed to talk to Olivia Hansen.

IT HADN'T been easy to get her out of the cold and into Clancy's. Jay had used every ounce of persuasive skill he owned and fervent promises of no talk of her past, just her present and immediate future, to cajole her into having one lousy drink with him before she went home. She hadn't removed her raincoat, just sat there opposite him in a rear booth and answered in monosyllables as she sipped her drink. He had poured on the charm and pushed the Anthony Perkins boyishness to the limit to stretch one drink into two, and then into three. She was beginning to loosen up.

"I don't usually drink," she said. There was a growing slur to her words as she sipped her screwdriver. Yes, she was getting very loose. "Bad for the muscles."

"Hey, Paula" was playing on the juke. The vodka in the screwdrivers had relaxed the anger lines in her face, making her softer, prettier. There was even more vulnerability in her eyes, and a faint tang of sweat in the air. Jay found it exciting as all hell.

"Tell me about the muscles."

"What about them?"

"Why have them?"

"I gotta be strong." Her expression was suddenly fierce. "Strong enough to keep any man from doing just what he wants with me ever again!"

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Jay took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.* "You mean the rape?"

"Hey! I thought you weren't going to mention that!"

"I didn't bring it up — you did."

She calmed into silence.

"Want to talk about it?" Jay said softly.

"*No!*" She shook her head violently, then began to talk about it. "It was awful! Horrible! I was in my dressing room at Hubert's, getting ready to go on with my snake dance, when he — it — appeared out of nowhere. I mean, one minute I was alone in the room with all the lights on, and the next minute he was there and everything was dark and cold."

"What did he look like?"

She shuddered, and Jay wondered uneasily what it took to get a shudder out of a girl who used to dance wrapped up in a boa constrictor.

"I only got a glance at him before everything went dark, but he was old and greasy and unshaven and dirty, and his skin wasn't right, like it wasn't human, and he was cold, so goddamn cold, and the things he did to me and the things he made me do, *the things he made me do!*" She sobbed, and Jay thought she was going to lose it. "I was powerless, completely powerless!" She took a deep, shuddering breath. "But that'll never happen again." He saw her flexing her muscles under her coat. "No one'll ever do something like that to me again! Ever!"

"But how come you clammed up about it back then? Maybe they could have caught this creep."

She shook her head slowly. "The way he comes and goes? Nobody'll ever catch him. And besides, everyone was looking at me like I was crazy or trying a publicity stunt. It was insult to injury. I didn't need it."

As the jukebox began "Walk Like a Man," she glanced at the Schlitz clock on the wall.

"God! I've got to get home! The kid'll be starving!"

Kid! Jay saw his story fading away as she rose to her feet. He had to say something here, and quickly. "I didn't know you were married."

"I'm not. Never was. Baby's father was . . . well, we were just talking about him."

Jay was stunned. She got pregnant from the rape and kept the kid! What a headline! *Son of the Times Square Spook!* God, he could run this for months! He could make Profumo and Christine Keeler look like the Knights of Columbus!

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"Uh, why . . . ?" He didn't know how to phrase it.

"What was I to do? Risk an abortion and maybe die? Besides, it wasn't Baby's fault. He didn't do anything to me. And after carrying him for nine months, I . . . I couldn't give him up. I'm his mother, after all."

This was one weird lady, but she would be so *easy* to write about. The quotables just poured out of her! He couldn't let her go. He needed more time to work on her. If he could somehow get a picture of this kid —

"Let me walk you home," he said quickly.

"I don't need your protection."

Jay smiled. "I was hoping you'd protect *me!*"

She laughed, and Jay realized that it was the first time she had done that all evening.

"O.K. It's only a few blocks."

Jay used the walk to make contact with her. First he took her elbow as they crossed the street, then he kept a grip on her arm, then his arm around her shoulders. By the time they reached her apartment house, she was leaning against him.

This was working out fine, he thought as he followed her up the stairs to the third floor. A little romance here, along with a line about helping protect other innocent women from this rapist spook by going public in the *Investigator*, and she'd come around for sure.

It was a two-room apartment — a front door, a back room, and a kitchen. Liv went immediately to the back room, leaving Jay by the door. The front room looked like a gym — barbells and dumbbells all about. A padded pressing bench occupied the spot where most people put a couch.

Liv returned from the back room. "Baby's sleeping."

"You leave him alone here all day? How old is he?"

She took off her coat, then loosened the tie on the terry cloth bathrobe underneath. "One and a half. He sleeps all day and most of the night. I check on him between shows."

The bathrobe was off now, revealing her Supergirl bikini and her muscles. Ah, those muscles. Her breasts bobbed under the fabric as she walked over to him. She put her hands on his chest and looked up at him. He could tell the vodka had worked its magic.

"I need someone tonight. Want to stay?"

Jay ran his fingers up her biceps, over her deltoids and traps, and down to her lats. He pulled her close.

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"I couldn't say no even if I wanted to."

He realized with a pang that it was probably the first completely honest statement he had made all night.

She led him into the dark of the rear room. In the borrowed light from the front, he dimly saw a bed against the wall, and a crib in the far corner. He heard a rustle from the crib and saw the kid pull himself to his feet and look at them over the rail.

"He's awake," he whispered.

"That's O.K. We'll be in the dark here, and he won't know what we're doing."

Jay glanced at the crib again. He couldn't make out any of the kid's features, just a shadow, craning his head and neck over the rail and staring at them. He didn't like the idea of an audience, even if it was just a single 1½-year-old, but then Liv had his shirt open and was kissing his chest, and he forgot all about the kid.

She was crying, sobbing gently under him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing! That was so good. Sometimes I just need that. I tell myself I don't, but sometimes I just do. And that was so good."

It *had* been good, Jay thought. *He* had been good. Damn good! At the end there, he had thought she was going to crush him. Even now she still had her arms and legs wrapped around him as he lay weak and limp atop her.

"You don't have to cry."

"Yes, I do. 'Cause I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You kidding? That was wonderful!"

"Oh good. That makes me feel a little better."

Jay was trying to figure out what she was getting at, when he heard a noise over by the crib. He glanced up. The crib was empty.

"I think your baby's out."

He felt her arms and legs tighten about him.

"I know."

He sensed movement along the floor, coming toward the bed, then a little face popped up over the edge of the mattress, only inches away, and looked at him. He cried out in shock at the huge, dark, staring eyes and wide slit of a mouth crowded with teeth that would have been more at

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home in a shark. As the kid's teeth angled toward his throat, he struggled to get up.

"Let me go!"

Liv's arms and legs tightened around him even more, locking him against her, helpless.

"I'm sorry," she said with a sob, "but Baby needs you, too."

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 30½: *In Which 3 Cinematic Variations on "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" Are Presented*

ON SEPTEMBER 9th, 1977, I left for Paris to begin work with director William Friedkin on a theatrical feature based on my short story, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." The story, winner of a Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe award as best short story of 1974, was to have starred Jeanne Moreau. Because of film industry problems pursuant to the trade unions' contract raises, due early in 1978, it was contractually imperative that I have the script completed by the end of October. I was not able to meet that deadline.

The short story from which the screenplay was to have been expanded, was a fantasy based on the real-life murder of a woman named Catherine Genovese, in the section of Queens called Kew Gardens, in 1964.

At the time, the killing made worldwide headlines chiefly because it had been witnessed by thirty-eight neighbors of Kitty Genovese, not one of whom made the slightest effort to save her, to scream at the killer, or even to call the police. (One man, in fact, viewing the murder from his third-floor apartment window, stated later that he rushed to turn up his radio so he wouldn't hear the woman's screams.) The excuse offered by almost every one of those wretched thirty-eight witnesses was that "I didn't want to get involved." It became an emblematic incident of an alienated society, and entire books have been written on the phenomenon.

(And for those who have sought to dismiss the incident as an isolated aberration of its time, here are excerpts from the opening paragraphs of a *New York Times* article dated Friday, December 28th, 1974:

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"While at least one neighbor heard her dying screams and did nothing, a 25-year-old model was beaten to death early Christmas morning in her Kew Gardens, Queens, apartment, which virtually overlooks the scene of the murder of Catherine Genovese 10 years ago.... The 10-story red brick building where the last murder occurred was the residence of many of the 38 witnesses who heard or saw the knife-slaying of Miss Genovese on the street below in the early morning hours of March 13, 1964, and neither called the police nor took any other action.... The latest victim, Sandra Zahler of 82-67 Austin Street, was apparently slain about 3:20 A.M. Wednesday, when a woman in the next-door apartment on the fifth floor said she heard screams and the sounds of a fierce struggle.... Madeline Hartmann, who lives in the apartment next to the victim's and who recalled having heard the screams of Miss Genovese 10 years ago, told in an interview of having heard Miss Zahler scream and of other sounds of an apparent struggle. ... While most of those who witnessed the murder of Miss Genovese have moved away from Kew Gardens, some because of negative publicity about their inaction, some still remain in the neighborhood and a few still live in the building where Miss Zahler died.") In an eerie way, the fantasy-horror explanation I presented in my story for the behavior of those 38 people was validated by the murder of the Zahler woman ten years later. In fact, Sandra Zahler might easily have been the real-life model for the heroine of "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," and the fate that befell her might as easily have come straight out of my fiction. (For those unfamiliar with the story, it can be found in my collections *Deathbird Stories* and last year's *The Essential Ellison*, as well as in a number of anthologies including *Best Detective Stories of the Year: 1974* and *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, Series III and the recent David Hartwell-edited anthology, *The Dark Descent*.)

Neither in the nine years between the murder of Kitty Genovese and the writing of "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," nor in the fifteen years since its publication, did it ever occur to me that I would someday have to explain *who* Kitty Genovese was, why her death was (and remains) a modern, urban horror of the most paralyzing sort, or what it was about that slaying that so obsessed me that I would be driven to write a story that to this day frightens me no less than at the moment I completed it; a story that I think is the most chilling thing I've ever written.

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I would have instantly dismissed such a silly thought. To forget Kitty Genovese and the cultural icon she became would be as impossible as forgetting the mythic origins of Jack the Ripper, Dr. Crippen, Gilles de Rais, Sawney Beane, Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald or John Dillinger. Nothing less than unthinkable!

But a terrible cultural amnesia assails us, and young people today seem to learn no history in their schools; and that which they learn they forget immediately after their spot quizzes. The Korean War is as misty in the public mind as the Wars of the Roses.

But in 1977, when Billy Friedkin took me to Paris to turn "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" into a film of terror that spoke to the violence of cities, the omen that Kitty Genovese had become, an omen of slasher films we take for granted only a decade later, was as bright as the blood on a knife blade.

It's a shame time constraints killed the project. . .

The production entity that had bankrolled Friedkin's deal put me in breach; standard operating procedure. The film therefore, would not be made. No one's fault but mine ... and time. With which I've had problems before. But ...

While in Paris, I wrote three visual openings for the screenplay. They are sequences intended to set the tone for the film, this ugly, mean horror-fantasy about evil in big cities. If you look up the short story, then the subliminal thrust of these openings will link for you.

They are three very different openings, yet each one goes to the thematic core of the story. I have arranged them in order of preference, from least desirable to most appealing. They are offered as examples of the way in which a writer of books and stories can adapt him- or herself to writing for motion pictures.

It's a matter of thinking visually.

Offered as addenda to these essays, in which I extoll the art and craft of screenwriting, for those few of you who may never have had the chance to enjoy the visual magic endemic to that special form of fantastic literature.

Offered as a sorta kinda bonus column, so you won't feel cheated out of your chosen portion of *Watching*. And I would be less than forthright with you were I not to add this:

Quite a few years ago I rancorously resigned from membership in Science Fiction Writers of America, an organization that I helped to found and which, in the capacity of its first Vice-President, I served. I resigned because the membership at large decided, in its wisdom, to drop the Nebula category of Best

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Dramatic Presentation.

I'll not go into the affront to SFWA's members who work in *both* film and books that this action proffered. Nor will I dwell on the horrors that resulted from SFWA having previously given Nebulas not to the author(s) of notable screenplays, but to the finished, collaborative films—and being pissed-off when Woody Allen didn't come to the Banquet to accept the award—rather than understanding that what scenarists do is different from what novelists do, and that the best screen-play category should have been judged not by a large membership to whom the scripts were unavailable, but by a blue ribbon panel changed from year to year, a panel that would scrutinize the *written words*. That's *really* ancient history. So I won't go into all that.

But this year, my screenplay based on Isaac Asimov's *I Robot* cycle of stories (an unproduced film that exists *only* as the written word) has garnered a number of recommendations for the Nebula in the category of Best Novel. (Well, the form of it may be different from the standard novel, but it *is* about 100,000 novel-length words; and it appeared as a serial in a competitor to this journal you now read; and the Nebula Awards Committee judged it eligible.) So for the first time, a work written to be filmed, rather than published between covers, has a chance to demonstrate to a frequently-irrational stick-in-the-mud constituency that—out of ignorance, I presume—their out of hand and off the wall dismissal of filmwriting has been a tunnel-visioned kind of snobbery as outdated and jejune as that of the land warfare experts who *knew* the Maginot Line was unbreachable, or the cavalry supporters who sneered at the possibility that air power would forever alter the forms of waging war. This effete dismissal of screenwriting by a cadre of writers concretized in their thinking, serves two non-productive ends:

First, it perpetuates an almost hayseed attitude, provincial and purblind, rooted in a fearfully uneducated perception of the film industry as *Terra Incognita:* a land of savages and arrivistes lying in wait for the unwary sf writer; slavering Philistines who debased and crushed the souls of Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West and William Faulkner and Dashiell Hammett and Dorothy Parker, and wasted their talent; a place of goofy nonwriting in which no self-respecting "Sci-fi guy" would deign to soil his/her pristine perfection. (A pristine perfection that is apparently unsullied by the penning of paperback adaptations of hack, commercial movies; cheap horror novels

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chiefly distinguished and distinguishable one from another by embossed foil covers featuring fangs dripping blood and demon children brandishing meat cleavers; Tolkien and Mallory ripoffs awash with elfin creatures and swordspersons with unpronounceable names forever on the road in search of mystic jewels, coronets of kingship or keys to alternate universes; and endless one-note ideas meretriciously bloated for the tawdriest commercial reasons into trilogy, quartet, sextet, octology, nonology and dekalogy. It escapes me how working in film could be any more witless or talent-bashing than what these literary elitists do for low advances and specious career motives.)

But this reiteration of yokel mythology about Cloud Cuckoo Land spreads a miasma of trepidation and booga-booga boogeymen that deters good writers in our genre from attempting to work in the screenplay form. In this way, they are relegated to writing only in the printed media, and they are cut off not only from a salutary expansion of their talents—writing for film hones the visual sense better than any other exercise I've ever come across, in the way photography sharpens the eye of the painter—but from the vast sums of money and the pleasures of filming attendant on such projects.

As for Hollywood crushing the sensitive blossom of a writer's abilities, "Pep" West wrote what was unarguably his finest novel, *The Day of the Locust*, during the five years in which he flourished as a successful studio scenarist, and would no doubt have continued his brilliant auctorial career had he not stupidly snuffed out his life (and that of his wife, Eileen McKinney) in a senseless car accident resulting from a penchant for speeding, which had caused rollovers and warnings from friends previously; Scott Fitzgerald's "Pat Hobby" stories, written while he sank lower and lower in Hollywood due to alcoholism and the deteriorating mental condition of Zelda, may not be the apex of his writing (though they remain charmingly antic and mordant despite the pecksniffian cavils of quite another set of literary elitists), but it *was* writing done in Hollywood while he worked at the studios (ineptly, it turns out), and don't forget he put together almost all of *The Last Tycoon*, which many scholars contend would have been his most mature work, while being "destroyed" by Tinseltown; Faulkner's studio work supported his wife, his family, his lover and himself while he turned out brilliant novels that were critically acclaimed, but were not bookstall runaways, and in that way his screen writing was like a

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day job, freeing him financially to indulge his muse as sybaritically as he wished in books.

As Saul Bellow has pointed out: "Writers are not necessarily corrupted by money. They are distracted—diverted to other avenues."

As living testimony to this, may I point out that whatever you, dear reader, think of my writing—pro or con—almost *all* of what I have done that is of worth has been done right here in Hollywood, where I have lived happily for 26 years. There is no deep secret to it, not for me, not for Fitzgerald, not for Michael Crichton or George R.R. Martin or for Richard Matheson. It is commonsense. If one retains a sense of one's literary worth, and writes for film with the same punctiliousness brought to the books and stories, one can live decently and have all the time one wishes to write books that challenge and explore the limits of one's talent . . . rather than signing on to do yet another furry-footed fantasy for a paperback publisher whose already overloaded schedule guarantees that the book it took you six months or a year to write will get a mingy six days of display and then be stripped and returned for credit, effectively putting a year of hard work out-of-print almost before it's been published.

But because of the widespread Accepted Wisdom of writers who, in their imperial fiat, deigned to kill the Best Dramatic Presentation Nebula, many sf/fantasy writers who could move comfortably and profitably between film and books look toward the West Coast as if it were the Bermuda Triangle.

Which brings me to the second non-productive aspect of the matter. Because the people who *could* and *should* be doing films of the fantastic are frightened away from the medium, the jobs fall into the clutches of hacks and parvenus who think an alien invasion is a fresh idea. And we all suffer. Because they write shitty films.

The producers don't know any better. They aren't conversant with the fecundity of imagination regularly demonstrated in the genre, so they can't be blamed for thinking the dusty old stuff they're getting is fresh and innovative. Nor can they really be blamed for buying plagiaristic, watered-down ideas stolen from the best of our people (see column #30). They know no better.

By eschewing jobs in feature films, sf/fantasy writers abandon the field of creative battle to the hypsters and ex-talent agency mailroom boys who become "writers." And what results I review here regularly, with hysteria and disgust.

The days in which there were only Beaumont, Bloch, Matheson,

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Ellison, Gerrold, Crais and a few others writing films, are gone. John Varley works here. So does George R.R. Martin. And Steven Barnes and John Shirley and Norman Spinrad and Thomas Disch (to greater or lesser degree of involvement), to name just a few.

With *I, Robot* a possibility for inclusion on the Nebula final ballot, the time is right to raise the question again: *Why is screenwriting not treated with equal dignity by SFWA?*

Chances of its winning are infinitesimal, but I am, at this moment, inordinately proud to have a work in the scenario form even vying for a slot as Best novel. It heartens my brother and sister writers in this genre who move between the two media. It seems there will always be those so limited in their perception of what is "appropriate" that the screenplay will be pooh-pooh'd—of the many letters received by the sf magazine that published *I, Robot* recently, there were the expected few that came from readers who said, "What *is* this? I don't know how to read it," or "Why did you waste space on a script . . . it was good, but it just ain't like what you usually publish," and one can feel little more than sadness at readers who wear blinders—but movies are *the* popular medium in which outstanding work can be done (don't get me onto tv, please!), and it's twenty-five years past time that SFWA should be rewarding that excellence of craft seen by many more millions all over the world than ever read one of our short stories.

Which is not to say that working in Hollywood is free of angst or heartbreak or time-waste or horror. There is probably no less of any of that than one finds in any industry. And heaven knows I've written about those horrors and inequities at tedious length in a hundred different forums. And may again, here in these pages. But I am not suggesting that every good writer of a page of prose chuck it all in New Jersey and rush to knock on doors at Universal. I *am* suggesting that careful, imaginative, worthy work is being done by many of SFWA's writer-members in this dazzlingly inventive form, and it's time those who sneer at film writing because of their own fears and limited abilities be countered by an equally vocal segment of the writing community raised in a later time that acknowledges the importance and seriousness of motion pictures as Art.

So, because I'm nuts about these snippets intended for "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," a film that was never made, and to get the dialogue going, I offer examples of *script.*

I talk a great deal about the

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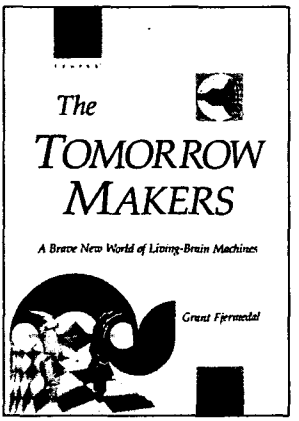
script in these columns. I quote from Ring Lardner, Jr., who said: "No good film was ever made from a poor script." And I try to convince those of you who "can't read script stuff" and those of you who, like me, love movies, that without first the *word*, the directors and actors would stand there with their fingers up their noses. This, as palliative to the endless interviews with arrogant thespians who tell the Rex Reeds and Mary Harts of the world how they "rewrote the dialogue" right there on the set.

I have digressed wildly, for purpose, but at last, in three quick scenes, I offer you some direct evidence of where the vision comes from that results finally in a motion picture. It comes from the writer. And the better the writers available to know-nothing producers, the better will be the films we see, the movies I review here. In these three snippets the eye of the writer becomes the vision of the scenarist. They're easy to read. Just let the inner eye *see* what the words tell you to see. Read and close your eyes and roll the cameras in your head. This isn't work, it's a paid vacation.

And no matter what those men and women who yell *Action!* try to con you into believing, they are afoot in the desert without the art and craft of the writer.

"This nonfiction book has enough new ideas for 16 Star Trek sequels. And better dialogue."

Rudy Rucker, author of Infinity and the Mind



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THE WHIMPER OF WHIPPED DOGS: *Variation 1*

FADE IN:

1 NEW YORK STREET — NIGHT

Chill and damp. The pavements look as though they're coated with fever-sweat. Fog and mist silently swirl and hang like torn lace in the air. An upper West Side sort of street with ancient light stanchions that cast dull illumination, fog-shrouded light, just enough to see vaguely, with halations around them.

CAMERA MOVES STEADILY down the street at waist height. Past withering brownstones, battered garbage cans that are chained by their lids to iron fences, flaking stone stoops, steps leading down to basement apartments, huge plastic bags of refuse at the curbs, cars parked almost one atop another. And all of it swathed in obscuring fog. CAMERA PANS LEFT as it CONTINUES MOVE IN and we see down a short throw of steps into a sub-street cul-de-sac entrance to an apartment. A man in shapeless clothes lies unmoving with this feet and legs aimed toward us. His head and shoulders below. Upside-down. One arm outflung. Head twisted at an unnatural angle. As though he fell backward down the stairs. Clearly dead, though we cannot see his face.

CAMERA SWINGS BACK and CONTINUES MOVING down the street with a smooth, casual movement. A woman lies dead in the gutter, face toward the curb so we cannot see her features, one arm bent up and lying on the sidewalk above her. CAMERA does not linger.

As CAMERA MOVES DOWN STREET toward the park and the river, seen vaguely through the trembling mist, we find ourselves looking for more bodies, but we cannot be certain if those two huddled shapes in the VW at the curb are dead; they are slumped forward on the dash but they might be just sleeping; that pile of rags at the mouth of the alley might be an old man with a battered hat jammed down on his dead face, but it could be just trash; and as we enter the small park abutting the drop to the Hudson River we see

(CONTINUED:)

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1 *CONTINUED:*
what could be a woman's naked arm protruding from under a bush, but it might be only a dead branch. It might be.

But we know for certain that the man sitting on the bench is dead. His head hangs back as only a head with its throat cut can hang. At that awkward angle, arms out to the sides, legs spread, body braced against the bench. CAMERA SWINGS PAST and PASSES ON to HOLD the silent river, fog rising and tumbling. Then, out on the River, lonely and desperate, we HEAR the SOUND of a tug heading for the Narrows. Once, twice, distantly. Then silence again. The city is silent.

FADE TO BLACK
and
FADE OUT.

THE WHIMPER OF WHIPPED DOGS: *Variation 2*

FADE IN:

1 RED FRAME — IN MAGMA POOL
Around the CAMERA molten lava bubbles and seethes. No sound. High contrast. CAMERA BEGINS TO RISE up through the maelstrom. It does not tilt, but RISES VERTICALLY. It reaches the surface of the magma pool, breaks the tension and we see across the leaping, spitting surface. CAMERA CONTINUES RISING through steam in the chamber above the lava. To the dendritic stone of the cavern ceiling. CAMERA PASSES THROUGH, STILL RISING.

DISSOLVE THRU:

2 CAMERA RISING THRU ROCK — EFFECT

Varying levels of light and dark, indicating stratification of rock. Through iron, mica schist, diatomaceous earth, layers of roiling oil, feldspar, marble, sparkling levels of gold, diamonds, phosphates, solid granite, up and up.

(DISSOLVE THRU TO:)

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3 CAMERA IN SOIL — EFFECT

RISING SMOOTHLY as we view it in the manner of someone in an elevator seeing floor after floor dropping past. Up through rock and soil to empty spaces, through and up to hard-packed sub-soil, concrete slabbing, coils and snakes of cable, electrical conduit, pipes. Up past them through metal sheathing, into flowing water—a sewer system. CAMERA RISES to feature a metal ladder used by maintenance crews. Up the ladder to a grating above us as we

DISSOLVE THRU:

4 STREET — NIGHT

CAMERA RISES up out of the sewer grating to HOLD for a beat the silent night street of New York. SHOOT THE LENGTH of the street in fog and rain. CAMERA CONTINUES to RISE after beat; TILT CAMERA UP to feature the huge silent monoliths of incredibly tall buildings that close in overhead.

HOLD the ominous leaning structures as the clouds tear apart for a moment and the single white eye of the Moon is seen. In the b.g. DISTANCE we HEAR the SOUND of dogs crying, as though they are being beaten. Not loud. We may not hear it at all. Then the clouds close over again, the Moon is gone, and the fog swirls in to FILL FRAME.

FRAME TO BLACK.

THE WHIMPER OF WHIPPED DOGS: *Variation 3*

FADE IN:

1 SHOT ACROSS WATER — NIGHT

(CONTINUED:)

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1 CONTINUED:

Dark, slick water. Oily. CAMERA MOVES IN just above the softly undulating surface. An occasional silvered flash across a gentle swell, as of moonlight skimming into darkness. Fog rolls across the lens. CAMERA IN STEADILY toward a massive throw of land that rises up in b.g. We can make out nothing but the gray shape coming toward us.

SLOW STEADY MOVE IN across the water till we perceive we are beaching on an island. Fog rolls up the naked beach. CAMERA IN to climb the beach and MOVES IN through darkness across low dunes. Now something rises up through the darkness. Tall. CAMERA KEEPS MOVING in on the shape. It is an Easter Island menhir. One of the great stone faces of antiquity. Silence.

CAMERA ANGLES SMOOTHLY AROUND the statue and goes past. Across the dead island to another head. And past to another. And another. To the largest of them. CAMERA TILTS DOWN and MOVES IN for EXTREME CLOSEUP through the roiling fog of the ashy ground.

HOLD EXTREME CLOSEUP of a bright, clean very modern knife lying in the sandy ash at the foot of the menhir. Again, a brief flash of silver light, this time across the blade—as if the moon had hurled one single beam through the clouds and the fog.

Then a drop of water strikes the knife blade. Then a drop of water dimples the sand beside it. Then another. Then it begins to rain steadily. The knife sinks slowly into the rain-soaked absorbent ash and sand, and as its haft goes under, the fog closes down, swirls and FILLS FRAME.

CAMERA HOLDS on fog as we HEAR in the b.g. DISTANCE the SOUND of a ululating siren: an ambulance, a police car perhaps, a truck carrying people to ovens; we cannot quite place it. It recedes and SILENCE resumes.

FRAME TO BLACK.

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Speculation about life after death is a topic writers have dwelt on for centuries. Bradley Denton ("In the Fullness of Time," May 1986) richly and riotously turns his talents to the examination of the life certain comedians might have encountered (or may expect to encounter) after death. "The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians," however, is much more than the limning of a particular aspect of celestial society. Bradley Denton also uses the tale to satirize certain views held by our own society and to present a rather dystopian view of heaven.

THE CALVIN COOLIDGE HOME FOR DEAD COMEDIANS

By Bradley Denton

*The what-*should-*be never*
did exist. . . .
There is only what is.

1.

THE AUTHOR OF *HOW TO Talk Dirty and Influence People* couldn't remember his own name, so he decided to ask the driver of the pickup truck in which he was riding.

Red stitching over the right breast pocket of the driver's blue overalls spelled out "Ol' Pete."

"Excuse me, ah, Pete," the author said hesitantly. "Who am I?"

Ol' Pete, an elderly man with a creased, suntanned face and a white

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beard, adjusted his blue baseball cap and scratched his scalp.

"Yuh," he said. "That's typical."

"Typical of *what?*" the author asked.

Ol' Pete grimaced. "Take a look at yourself, Sonny."

"Sonny" looked down at himself and saw that he was dressed in a brown jacket, tie, and slacks; brown shoes; and a white shirt. The belly threatening to pop the shirt buttons was too big for the rest of his body.

Gotta get on a diet, he thought.

Then he saw the thin copper band encircling his left wrist. LEONARD was stamped into the bracelet in capital letters.

"That's me?" he asked.

"Yuh, unless somebody made a mistake."

Leonard rubbed at the bracelet with his right thumb.

"It doesn't feel right," he said. "Is it my first name or my last?"

"Yuh, that's typical, too."

Leonard wanted to ask "Typical of *what?*" again, but Ol' Pete began whistling "Camptown Races," and Leonard decided it would be a shame to interrupt.

Instead he looked out the open window on his right. The pickup truck — a dusty, battered red International Harvester — was chugging along a narrow dirt road that wound through a forest of thick-trunked trees. Leonard guessed that most of the trees were cottonwoods, but he wasn't sure.

He made a mental note: He was not a botanist. Or at least not a botanist who specialized in trees.

What kind of botanist would write a book called *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, anyway?

He took a deep breath. The warm air smelled wonderful, like sunshine on mown grass. The season was spring, he guessed, but late spring, because the trees were fully leaved. The gently swaying branches created an ever-changing pattern of sun dapples on the road.

"Nice area," Leonard said. His voice, at least, was familiar. "Where are we going?"

Ol' Pete stopped whistling long enough to say, "Ain't there a one of you willing to think for yourself?"

Leonard wanted to say something sarcastic but didn't know what, so he searched his mind for a memory that would help him.

In brief flashes, he remembered —

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— *crowds, laughter, drugs, sex, cops* —

— but he couldn't imagine what any of that had to do with being in an International pickup with a man he had never seen before.

He twisted the mirror attached to the outside of his door and looked at his reflection.

The pale, smooth-shaven face had brown, wavy hair; blue eyes surrounded by dark, slightly puffy circles; and an ordinary, medium-sized nose. Although he thought the face would look better with a beard, it was definitely his — a good face, a face practiced in attracting women. But it didn't look like the kind of face that would go with the name "Leonard."

Without trying to recall the information, he remembered that he was forty years old.

He turned back toward Ol' Pete. "Hey, do I look forty to you?"

Ol' Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Y'all look alike to me."

Leonard began to feel irritated.

"Look, Pops," he said, "I don't know where I came from or how I got here. I'm 100 percent confused, and you're not helping, which is making me 100 percent pi — pi — pi —"

Leonard frowned. There was a word he wanted to use, but he couldn't think of more than its first two letters.

"You mean 'angry,' right?" Ol' Pete said, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement.

"Yeah," Leonard said, looking first at his hands, then at the cracked leather seat, and then at the dashboard, as if he might have misplaced the unknown word. "Yeah, I'm angry, but . . . that isn't the way I was going to say it."

Ol' Pete adjusted his baseball cap and chuckled. "Well, I can see why you've been assigned to Mrs. Vonus."

Leonard stopped trying to think of the word. "Mrs. Vonus?" he said.

"She'll be your Housemother."

"Housemother?"

Ol' Pete clicked his tongue. "You got yourself a bad case of echolalia, boy."

Leonard wanted to punch Ol' Pete in the nose, but restrained himself. He had enough trouble with the cops without adding battery to the list.

He made a mental note of that, too.

"How about some compassion, Pops?" he said. "Something weird's hap-

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pened to me, and all I'm getting from you is 'that's typical' and enough whistling to make Jiminy Cricket toss his cookies. I didn't ask for this, you know."

Ol' Pete laughed and beat on the button in the center of the steering wheel. The horn blared out derisive honks, and panicked birds flew up on both sides of the road.

Leonard glared. "Just what's so funny, you smug coc — coc —"

Again he knew there was a word he wanted, but was unable to remember it.

Ol' Pete raised an eyebrow. "Got in trouble for that one, I'll bet."

Leonard experienced another flash of memory, like a hot rush of blood, and the force of it suppressed his anger.

"Yeah," he said. "I did. I don't know why, but the cops took me in for it."

Ol' Pete patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Sonny. It'll come clear in a bit. We're almost there." He pointed.

A few hundred yards ahead, a three-story red-brick mansion sat in a fenced clearing at the base of a huge hill. Half-hidden golden buildings shimmered at the top of the hill, but it was the brick mansion toward which Ol' Pete pointed.

"That's the Calvin Coolidge Home," Ol' Pete said.

Leonard rubbed his forehead, which was starting to hurt. "I thought you said I was assigned to a Mrs. Vopis."

"Mrs. Vonus, boy. She runs the Coolidge Home. And it ain't Calvin Coolidge's; that's just what she calls it."

"Don't call me boy," Leonard said. "I'm forty god — go — forty years old."

The old man pounded the horn again. "A babe in the woods!" he chortled.

Leonard was beginning to think that Ol' Pete was more than a little crazy. He was glad the ride was almost over.

Even though he had no idea where it had taken him.

2.

LEONARD HAD to cross a narrow plank over a deep ditch to get to the brick walk that led to the mansion's front door. He was halfway across when the International's horn blared behind him, and he windmilled his arms to keep his balance.

"So long, Sonnyboy!" Ol' Pete bellowed. "Hope to see you on the Hill one o' these days!"

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Leonard didn't look back to acknowledge the farewell. He was too busy trying to avoid falling into the ditch, which was half full of murky water.

He did turn around when he'd finally made it to the other side. The truck was gone, without even a puff of dust to mark its passage.

He hadn't heard it drive away. He couldn't even remember when he'd stopped hearing the engine noise.

"Holy sh — sh —," he said, and began to see a connection between the words he couldn't remember.

He walked slowly up the path, staring down at the chipped bricks. He tried to mutter obscenities as he went.

"Sh — sh — Excrement," he said. "Fuh — fuh —. Sexual intercourse. Genitalia. Scion of a golden retriever. Immoral congress with a chimpanzee. Guano cranium."

It was the best he could do.

He was so preoccupied that he stumbled over the step at the end of the walk. His palm came up just in time to keep his face from impacting on the wall to the right of the door.

His eyes were five inches from a bronze plaque bolted to the bricks:

THE CALVIN COOLIDGE MEMORIAL REHABILITATION FACILITY
VISITORS WELCOME
THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING

"What the coitus," Leonard muttered, and pushed away from the wall to face the dark wooden door, which was intricately carved with depictions of bored-looking cherubim.

A black iron knocker shaped like a microphone dominated the center of the door. The flat piece of metal the knocker was to strike had been forged in the shape of a laughing face, but Leonard knew this only because of the open mouth. The rest of the face had been beaten smooth.

He didn't want to knock, so he kicked at a loose brick in the step for several minutes, waiting for something to happen. A blue jay landed in a mimosa tree and scolded him.

What am I afraid of! he thought. *Anyplace named after Calvin Coolidge, for crying out loud, can't be too horrible. Besides, they might have something to eat.*

The knocker felt hot in his hand. He brought it up quickly and let it fall.

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The sound was like a thunderclap.

Startled, Leonard jumped backward off the step and fell, landing on his buttocks on the sidewalk.

"Fornication with one's maternal parent," he said. It was distinctly unsatisfying.

The massive door swung inward. Leonard wanted to run into the woods, but before he could stand, he saw the woman in the doorway. She was a blue-haired little old lady in a dark gray dress.

It would be hard, he thought, to imagine a more unthreatening figure. Yet he was frightened, and he thought he knew why when he noticed that the woman's right hand was curled into a veined, bony fist.

If there's a balled-up handkerchief in there, he thought, *I'm at the mercy of somebody's Jewish mother.*

Not his, though. His mother had been larger. . . .

Another mental note. Sooner or later, he'd have enough clues to know who he was.

The woman in the doorway looked down at him and pursed her lips in displeasure.

"So much for first impressions," Leonard mumbled, and stood. His legs felt rubbery.

The woman gave a short sigh and said, "I am Mrs. Vonus. You must be Leonard. We've been expecting you." Her voice was high, thin, and dry.

"Who's 'we'?" Leonard asked.

Mrs. Vonus stepped back and gestured with her left hand. "Come in, come in. We might as well get started."

"Get started on *what*?"

Mrs. Vonus sighed again. "Rule Number One, Leonard, is that it's rude to question your Housemother in such a belligerent tone. Please come inside now, or I'll be forced to give you a minus for your first day."

Leonard walked, a little shakily, up the step and into the dark, cool mustiness of the Calvin Coolidge Home. The worn, wine-colored carpeting in the foyer felt spongy under his shoes.

Mrs. Vonus shut the door, and the dim foyer became even dimmer.

"Saving on electricity?" Leonard asked, trying to keep his voice from quavering.

The woman appeared out of the dimness and looked up at him. She sighed a third time.

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"You sure krechtz a lot," Leonard said.

The Housemother shook her head. "We have our work cut out for us."

Leonard backed away a few steps. "Speaking of cutting," he said, "I'm cutting out if somebody doesn't give me a good reason to stay. For one thing, it's too dark in here, and for another, it smells like moldy bread."

Mrs. Vonus placed her right hand on his forearm.

No handkerchief, he thought. *Must've stuffed it down her dress when I wasn't looking.*

"Your eyes will adjust to the light," Mrs. Vonus said, "and you will become accustomed to the scent of age. As for your questions — This is your Orientation Day, and I shall answer those questions that are appropriate."

Leonard tried to pull away from her grip and found that he couldn't, even though she wasn't holding him tightly. He began to suspect that he was dreaming.

"You are not dreaming," the Housemother said.

"Which is exactly what I'd expect a dream-character to say," Leonard said quickly, before he had a chance to panic. "On the count of three, I'm going to wake up." He closed his eyes. "One, two, three."

When he reopened his eyes, he could see a little better. But he was still in the foyer of the Calvin Coolidge Home, and still in the grip of Mrs. Vonus.

"Three and a half," he said.

"Come into the Front Parlor," Mrs. Vonus said, and pulled him to the left. His feet shuffled along against his will.

They passed through a wide, arched entranceway into a large room with the same wine-colored carpeting as the foyer. Tall windows with gauzy drapes let in just enough sunlight for Leonard to see clearly. Ornate sofas and chairs were arranged neatly throughout the room, and huge bookcases loaded with black-spined volumes hulked against the walls. The wall space between the bookcases was covered with blue paisley paper.

Leonard shuddered. It was hideous stuff.

It wasn't quite as awful, though, as the massive mantel around the fireplace. It was carved from the same dark wood as the front door, and more bored cherubim flapped morosely across it in suspended animation.

Over the mantel, illuminated by two kerosene lamps in wall brackets,

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was the painted portrait of a clean-cut, Presbyterian-looking man.

Mrs. Vonus pulled Leonard close enough for him to read the brass plate at the bottom of the painting's frame. The words engraved into it were JOHN CALVIN COOLIDGE.

"Who's that?" Leonard asked. "I've heard of Calvin Coolidge, but —"

"John was his first name," the Housemother said reverently.

Leonard forced himself to smile, pretending to love the painting. Maybe if he was nice, she'd let go of his arm and he could split.

"You shan't go anywhere," Mrs. Vonus said.

She released his arm, and he found that his feet were stuck to the carpet.

Giving in to panic at last, he twisted his body painfully in an effort to escape. "Lord curse this mightily!" he yelled, and realized that he sounded ridiculous.

"You're heading for a minus," Mrs. Vonus said.

Leonard stopped flailing and tried to calm himself. He didn't know what a "minus" was, but the Housemother obviously had some sort of arcane power, and it wouldn't do to upset her. A "minus" might involve his liver escaping via his belly button.

He wondered why the idea that this little old lady had supernatural powers didn't strike him as meshuga.

The answer came floating up from his brain's lower layers:

Man, I've been dragged before people whose only power came from the word "Judge" in front of their names. What I'm dealing with here doesn't make any less sense than that.

"You must learn how to behave toward those who have been placed over you," Mrs. Vonus said.

"Yes, ma'am," Leonard said, trying to sound meek.

The Housemother pursed her lips. "You don't fool me. You're telegraphing a great deal of unhealthy defiance. Sooner or later, though, you must accept the order of the universe if you want to exist in a state of spiritual peace."

Leonard, to keep himself from responding sardonically, looked up at the portrait again and asked, "Is this the same Calvin Coolidge who was president during Prohibition?"

Mrs. Vonus reached up and buffed the brass plate with a wrinkled lace handkerchief.

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Aha! Leonard thought, and was immediately afraid. But the Housemother didn't seem to have "heard" him.

"Yes, this is he," she said. "The finest man to have ever served in public office. I find it ironic that you, one of the least fine men to have ever existed, were born during his administration."

Leonard made yet another mental note. If he had been born during Prohibition and was now forty years old, then this must be nineteen-sixty-something-or-other. . . .

"Time has no meaning here," Mrs. Vonus said. "We have days and nights, but only for convenience. A day is as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day."

Leonard couldn't stand it anymore. "Where the he — he — heck *am* I, then? You keep giving me this mystical shtick, but you're not telling me anything."

Mrs. Vonus sighed for what Leonard was sure must be the hundredth time since he'd entered the building. "Very well," she said in a tone of voice that clearly said *You'll be sorry*. "I prefer to give new residents more adjustment time before their screenings, but if you're impatient, we'll do it now. Come along." She began walking back toward the foyer.

Leonard found that he could move again, but before he followed the Housemother, he took a last look at the portrait.

"What a goyisher face," he muttered, and then remembered not only who Calvin Coolidge had been but who John Calvin had been:

Predestination. Purity. Punishment of sinners. Burnings at the stake. No sense of humor.

Leonard turned away from the mantel. He didn't think he was going to enjoy working this dump, but there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

3.

MRS. VONUS led him through the foyer, past a staircase that she said went up to "the dormitory," and down a wide hallway lined with glass cases. She walked like an overfed duck.

Some of the glass cases were in shadows so dark that Leonard couldn't make out the contents, but every thirty feet or so, a skylight let in diffused sunshine that revealed dusty medals and trophies. One case

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was full of china dinner plates painted with portraits of presidents and biblical figures.

"I never saw so much dre — dre — natural fertilizer in my life," Leonard said.

Mrs. Vonus sighed.

She paused under one of the skylights and gestured at the wall. Leonard stopped beside her and looked where she pointed.

Here, instead of a glass case, was a white plastic-coated board, ten feet high and eight wide, marked off in a grid of perpendicular black lines forming sixty rows of two-inch squares. Many of the squares, particularly on the right half of the board, were blank, but each of the others held one of three symbols: +, =, or -. Hanging on a long string to the right of the board was what looked like a capped felt-tipped marker.

To the left of each row of squares was a single name. Leonard found his and saw that every square in that row was blank.

"This is the Progress Board," Mrs. Vonus said. "Each day, I shall evaluate your attitude, composure, manners, posture, and language. A plus sign means that you are making great progress, and you shall receive a silver dollar. Since there are only forty spaces in each row, the Board cannot display a record of a resident's entire stay — however, all that matters is the total number of pluses. Each resident's total appears at the end of his row. When the total reaches two hundred, the resident may ascend to the top of the Hill."

"What's at the top of the Hill?" Leonard asked.

Mrs. Vonus gave him a severe look. "You'll know when you have two hundred pluses."

Leonard looked at the column of numbers and saw that only three of the sixty residents had more than a hundred pluses.

"An equal sign," Mrs. Vonus continued, "indicates that you are equivocal. You are not rewarded, but neither are you penalized. For each minus, however, you must pay a dollar to the Dessert Fund. If you have no dollars at the time, you must pay double when you do."

Leonard cleared his throat. "What's the Dessert Fund?"

For the first time, the hint of a smile flickered at the corners of the Housemother's mouth. "Every day at dinner, those residents who have received plus signs are given a special dessert at the expense of those who have received minuses."

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Leonard kept his eyes riveted on the Progress Board. *The old bat has power,* he thought, *but she's as crazy as an eighty-year-old stripper.*

"You'll soon know better," Mrs. Vonus said.

Leonard gritted his teeth. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'd appreciate a little privacy in my own brain."

"If you think dessert is crazy, Leonard, that's fine. From the looks of you, though, you take dessert quite seriously."

Leonard glared at her. "I've been planning to go on a diet, you rotten old set of external sexual characteristics!" he yelled. He didn't know what it was that he really wanted to call her, but he hoped she did.

Mrs. Vonus stepped closer to the Progress Board, uncapped the marker, and put a minus sign in the first box to the right of Leonard's name. Then she recapped the marker, dropped it so that it bounced on its string, and began waddling down the hall again.

"Please follow me," she said.

Leonard looked at the Progress Board and grinned. A quick vertical stroke could change a minus into a plus. . . .

He grabbed the marker, and a jolt of white-hot pain stabbed up his arm into his head.

When he could see again, he was on his back on the worn carpet. His arm and head throbbed. Mrs. Vonus stood over him, her helmet of bluish hair framed by the rectangular halo of the skylight.

"Come along, Leonard," she said. "You said you wanted answers. It's time for you to get them."

4.

THE HALLWAY ended in a movie-theater lobby, complete with a popcorn machine and candy counter. The wine-colored carpet of the hall gave way to thick, plush scarlet, and velvet ropes strung between brass posts defined a path leading to a pair of wide doors on spring hinges.

Leonard ached, but he almost forgot about the pain when he saw where he was. His first thought was that the place had to be an illusion, but there was no way to fake the smell of hot buttered popcorn.

What was a movie theater doing in an old mansion?

"It serves a purpose," Mrs. Vonus said.

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Leonard was about to yell at her again — he already had a minus, so what could it hurt? — but then he spotted two young women behind the U-shaped glass candy counter.

Both were wearing red-and-white striped blouses and short blue skirts. One was tall, blue-eyed, and blonde, with hair so long that its end was hidden behind the display of Milk Duds. The other, a brunette, had dark eyes and the most sensual mouth Leonard had ever seen. So far as he remembered, anyway.

He felt that there ought to be a redhead, but two out of three wasn't bad.

"Excuse me," he said to Mrs. Vonus without looking at her, and hopped over a velvet rope.

It was only when he leaned far forward over the counter that he noticed that the women, although extraordinarily beautiful, looked as if they never smiled.

"Hey, why so depressed?" Leonard asked. They didn't look depressed, exactly, but it was the closest word he could come up with on short notice. "It's a beautiful day outside. Lots of sunshine, birdies singing, green leaves all over the place. When do you two get off work, anyway? We could go for a picnic."

The blonde looked at him with a complete lack of interest. "May I help you, sir?" she said flatly.

"You bet, babe," he said, grinning. "You can tell me how much a smile costs."

The brunette said, "We have Goobers; Snocaps; JuJus; Milk Duds; Junior Mints; Licorice Whips, red and black; Hershey bars; and Jordan Almonds. We also have popcorn, with or without butter, and Royal Crown Cola. What will you have, sir?"

"A phone number," Leonard said. "A look, a smile, a touch, a wink."

"We don't have any of those, sir," the blonde said.

So that was the way they wanted to play it. O.K., fine — he knew the game as well as they did.

He straightened and shook his head in exaggerated dejection. "Some Goobers and Milk Duds, then. And your biggest tub of popcorn. Better give me a soda, too."

The brunette reached for the candy.

"Five dollars," the blonde said, moving toward the cash register.

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Leonard's mouth fell open. "Five bucks? I've been places where I could've bought *you* for that!"

Something touched his right elbow, and he jumped. Then he looked down and saw Mrs. Vonus standing beside him.

"This isn't World War II," she said, "and you aren't in a French brothel. These ladies are my employees, and they do not fraternize with residents."

Leonard leaned down and whispered, "I don't wanna fraternize. I wanna boink their brains out." He was pleased to discover that he remembered the word "boink," and wondered if the reason he was able to remember it was that it wasn't really a word at all.

The Housemother grasped his arm again. "You will be going to bed without dinner tonight, and there will have to be a considerable improvement in your demeanor before I will consider allowing you to come to dinner tomorrow."

Leonard tried to pry her fingers loose. "Hey, who d'you think you are, my mother? I don't have to stick around, y'know—"

"Yes, *you do*," Mrs. Vonus said, and yanked him away from the counter so hard that he thought his shoulder had dislocated.

"Hey, what about — ow! — what about my Milk Duds?" he cried.

"You don't have any silver dollars with which to buy them. At the rate you're going, it will be some time before you do."

The Housemother stopped before the double doors and released Leonard's arm.

"I'll bet your kids hate you," he said, rubbing his shoulder. "I'll bet you've never gotten a Mother's Day card in your life."

Mrs. Vonus pulled open the left-hand door, revealing darkness. Cool air rushed out and made Leonard shiver.

"Go in," the Housemother said. "Take any seat you like."

Leonard tried to step forward, but a tingling sensation in his spine stopped him.

Whatsa matter, shmu — shm —

Yet another word he couldn't remember. What kind of stupid dream was it where a man couldn't even call himself an obscene name in Yiddish?

He compromised:

Whatsa matter, schnook? Movie theaters are always dark inside. Otherwise you can't see the film. So go on in, because if you don't, Grandma Goering is gonna break your arm.

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"You're going to be awfully hungry in a day or two," the Housemother said grimly.

Leonard wanted to beat his head against the wall. "Are you gonna spy on me when I go to the john, lady?"

Mrs. Vonus gestured toward the darkness with her free hand. "Please, Leonard. I'm tired of holding the door."

He took a step toward the darkness and then paused. "Are you coming?"

"No, thank you," she said. "I must turn on the projector."

Leonard looked back at the unsmiling goddesses behind the candy counter.

"If I'm not back in two hours," he called, "better come revive me. Nude massages with baby oil often seem to be effective."

Then, before Mrs. Vonus could admonish him, he walked into the theater.

5.

THE DOOR swung shut behind him, and he paused at the top of the aisle to let his eyes adjust. A dim yellow light burned at the end of each row of seats, and the screen on the wall ahead glowed a dull gray. Leonard estimated that there were two hundred seats, all of them empty.

He was amazed at how clean the place was. "What's a movie house *without trash?*" he said aloud, then walked down to the fifth row and sat in the third seat left of the aisle.

The screen brightened, and the face of Mrs. Vonus appeared, ten feet tall and in ludicrously overtinted color.

Leonard wished he had a popcorn box to throw. He had to content himself with booing and hissing, and the sound echoed eerily.

"Welcome to the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Rehabilitation Facility," the amplified voice of Mrs. Vonus said from the ceiling and walls. "This facility specializes in the purification of those who have spent their lives trying to gain earthly rewards through the practice of so-called 'humor,' which, rather than evoking the laughter of joy, instead appeals to the listeners' prurient interest—"

"What's wrong with that?" Leonard yelled.

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"— thus leading to the deterioration of the moral fabric of society."

"Moral fabric?" Leonard shouted. "One hundred percent cotton denim, maybe? Rayon? Dacron? The weak, frayed elastic in most of my shorts?"

"Our therapy," Mrs. Vonus said, "consists of teaching our residents those things their parents and peers failed to teach them — patience, politeness, obedience, reverence, decorum, piety, and chastity."

Leonard jumped up and waved his right index finger at the screen. "Oh no, you don't! The Constitution says I don't have to be obedient, reverent, or chaste — especially chaste — as long as I don't abridge the rights of others, which I've never done! Furthermore, you wear too much makeup! I've spent decades in burlesque palaces, and I never saw so much rouge in my whole life!"

His last three words reverberated in his skull:

My whole life.

His legs felt rubbery again, and he collapsed into his seat. He was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm despite the theater's coolness.

What was the last thing he could remember before the ride in the red International pickup truck?

. . . something hot and delicious coursing through my body. . . .

Orgasm?

No; it had been hotter, faster, more like falling into a volcano —

"And now," Mrs. Vonus was saying, "a short feature to clarify the meaning of your presence here, after which you shall meet our other residents and enjoy a heartwarming and spiritually uplifting cinematic masterpiece. You shall return to this theater every day when you feel you must, which is the only way we have of telling time here. You shall come to the theater, eat dinner, and gather for housemeetings . . . according to when you feel you must."

"Whenever nature calls, huh?" Leonard mumbled.

The giant Mrs. Vonus disappeared and was replaced by the black-and-white image of a toilet.

"A toilet," Leonard whispered. His head felt as if it had been soaked in gasoline and lit with a match. "The villainous source of all those 'dirty toilet jokes.' . . . "

An overweight, pale man with dark hair and a beard appeared on the screen and sat on the toilet. He was nude.

Leonard tried to stand again, but his seat held him with the same

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irresistible force with which Mrs. Vonus had held his arm.

The two-dimensional phantom tightened a strap above an elbow.

Leonard tried to look away from the screen, but his head wouldn't move. Nor would his eyelids close. His eyes began to sting.

The man on the screen held a syringe. With the tip of his tongue touching his upper lip, he slid the needle into the bulging vein on the inside of his elbow. He loosened the strap.

After a moment he looked happy.

Then something happened to his eyes, and he fell off the toilet. He lay awkwardly on the tiled floor, as if frozen in the act of rolling from his back to his side. His bearded cheek was against the tiles. His eyelids closed.

Leonard wanted to scream, but his throat and tongue were paralyzed.

The cops came into the bathroom.

They looked at the naked man on the floor and talked. Through the roar of his fever, Leonard could hear only a fraction of what they said, but that was more than he wanted to hear.

"What'd I tell you?" one of the cops said.

A second cop said something else. A third laughed.

You sons of bit — bit — Leonard thought. But the word, the right word, the only word, wouldn't come.

Then, two by two, like animals trooping into Noah's Ark, the photographers and television cameramen came in. They shone bright lamps onto the body and popped flashbulbs at it as if to purify it with white light.

The tightness in Leonard's throat broke.

"Vultures!" he cried. "Can't I have some peace in my own bathroom?"

Two by two, they came and went.

"Bound to happen sooner or later," one of them said.

Leonard wanted to run to the screen and rip it with his fingernails and teeth.

"You drove me to it!" he shouted. "You and the cops who wouldn't have gotten out of their cars to keep a black man from getting beaten up but were ecstatic to come after me for telling the truth! I had to do something to get away! Sickest of the sick, huh? You bet I am! Sick of you self-righteous coc — coc — genital lickers!"

The last photographer finished shooting, then said, "Bye-bye, junkie," and walked out of the bathroom. Other people came in, but the picture was fading.

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Leonard slumped, staring at the fading image of his own body.

"I'm not a junkie," he said weakly. "I just needed to get away from the tapes and papers for a while. I just needed. . . ."

The screen went black.

Leonard wanted to cry, but his tear ducts wouldn't work. All he could do was dry-sob.

This is what I get for getting a tattoo, he thought bitterly.

But when the lights brightened and he rolled his shirt and jacket sleeve up from his left forearm, he saw that the tattoo was gone.

For a moment he had been sure of who he was, but now he knew that he could never again be sure of anything.

6.

AS LEONARD'S fever began to break, the double doors opened. Leonard turned and saw dozens of men, all dressed in brown slacks and jackets with white shirts, coming down the aisle. Some were barely out of their teens, and some were painfully old; yet they all looked alike. All were Caucasian, and all walked as if they were afraid of the floor. None of them was smiling.

Leonard used them as an excuse to try to forget the film he had just seen.

These guys told jokes for a living! So why do they look so . . . unfunny!

A shrunken, ancient man took the aisle seat on Leonard's right. Tremulously, he reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew a box of JuJus.

"Hey, Pops," Leonard said, leaning to the right and trying to keep his voice steady. "What's going on here?"

The old man looked at Leonard with a puzzled expression. "It's —" he began uncertainly, as if trying to remember something he was always forgetting. "It's the afternoon movie," he said finally.

"Yeah? You know what it is?"

The old man stared with grayish, red-rimmed eyes. "Same as always, I suppose," he said, as if Leonard had been foolish to ask the question, and then opened his box of JuJus.

Leonard's stomach rumbled.

Dead or not, he was hungry.

"Mind if I have a few?" he said, leaning closer.

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The grayish eyes regarded him curiously in the fading light.

"You're new, aren't you?" the old man asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Leonard said, becoming impatient as the screen lit up and music rang from the speakers. "C'mon, can I have some?"

"Up to you," the old man said, extending the box.

Leonard held out his hand, and several JuJus slid into his palm.

"Thanks, man," he said, and turned to look at the screen. He had already missed the title, but he recognized the credits, which were flipping past on what looked like Christmas cards.

JAMES STEWART, he read, and then: DONNA REED.

He popped a candy into his mouth, and it crawled across his tongue.

He choked and spat the candy out, then felt the JuJus in his hand crawling, too. He could just make out their shapes in the flickering light from the movie screen.

Cockroaches.

Leonard yelped and shook his hand violently, scattering the roaches in all directions. One landed in his hair, and he began to hyperventilate as he frantically brushed it out.

"Real —," he began, shuddering and gasping. "Real — real funny, Pops."

"Not to me," the old man's voice answered from the darkness.

Leonard felt cold. Why was the air-conditioning in a movie theater always strong enough to freeze meat?

Shivering, he drew up his knees and hugged them to his chest.

He had seen his own death.

He had put a cockroach into his mouth.

On the movie screen, Jimmy Stewart, as good old George Bailey, was about to discover that *It's a Wonderful Life.*

Leonard leaned to his left and threw up into the adjacent seat.

7.

SEVENTEEN "DAYS" later, Leonard lay on his hard, narrow mattress and stared at the gray ceiling of his room. The cubicle had no window, so the only thing to look at besides the ceiling was the framed print on the wall above the foot of the bed. He refused to do that, because he hated it.

The print was a reproduction of a painting depicting a female saint

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being sliced to death by a huge wooden wheel studded with knives.

Earlier that day, Leonard had decided he couldn't stand the thing anymore, and he tried to take it down. It hadn't budged, so he tried to break the glass with his shoe. That had also failed, and he had received yet another minus for his efforts.

He didn't think he'd mind the print so much if the saint hadn't looked overjoyed about her impending filleting.

"It's perverse," he had told Mrs. Vonus after she'd called him down to the Progress Board to answer for his attempted vandalism. "Nobody should be happy about something like that. Talk about sick — *that's* sick!"

The Housemother had sighed, then pursed her lips.

"Why is it so difficult for you to understand, Leonard," she had said while uncapping the felt-tipped marker, "that sacrificing oneself for something greater is the highest achievement of spirituality?"

"Oh, I understand, all right," Leonard had said. "I just don't think she should be so pleased with the method. I mean, she looks like she thinks she's about to make it with Omar Sharif, for crying out loud."

Mrs. Vonus had dutifully marked the minus in the seventeenth box after his name.

As Leonard stared at the ceiling, he thought he understood what the Housemother had said about the nature of time here. The sun had set only sixteen times since his arrival, but he felt as if he'd been in the Home at least five years.

He had considered trying to escape, but even when the house let him go outside, the ditch bounding the front yard and the high wooden wall bounding the grounds on the other three sides kept him trapped. He hadn't been able to find the footbridge he'd crossed the first day.

He had also tried to befriend some of the other residents, hoping that together they might find a way out, but none of them would even talk to him. It was as if they were too preoccupied with trying to earn pluses to think about what might lie beyond the mansion's seven acres.

Leonard, though, was curious about the world outside the grounds, particularly the golden buildings on top of the Hill. He could just see them from the yard, glimmering between the trees high above like the sun peeking through gaps in green clouds.

Mrs. Vonus told him that he might someday be allowed to go up the Hill, but that he had a great deal of work to do first. Living on the Hill was

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a reward, she said, a privilege to be bestowed only upon those who proved themselves worthy.

"Who wants to live there?" Leonard had said. "I just want to check it out for chicks."

That had been his fifth minus.

Let's see, he thought, still staring at the ceiling. *Seventeen days with a total of fourteen minuses, three equal signs, and no pluses. That means I need twenty-eight straight pluses just to pay off what I owe the Dessert Fund. Then still more pluses if I want to buy anything for the movies . . . that is, The Movie.*

Seventeen days at the Coolidge Home meant that he had seen *It's a Wonderful Life* seventeen times. He didn't think he could bear to sit through it more than three or four more times if he didn't at least have something to eat to take his mind off it.

The fingers of his right hand plucked at the loose fabric of his shirt where his belly had tightened it two weeks earlier. Seventeen days without sweets — six of them without anything to eat at all — had helped him begin to lose the weight he'd been wanting to take off for months before his death. He supposed he ought to thank the Housemother for that, at least.

Maybe that would get him a plus. Unless, of course, she caught him thinking that it would. Mrs. Vonus wasn't an easy woman to please. He thought he'd go nuts trying to figure out how to get along with her, or at least how to avoid her.

He also thought he'd go nuts if he didn't get into the pants of at least one of the candy-counter women, which was one of the reasons why he couldn't get along with Mrs. Vonus.

"Desires of the flesh," she had told him over and over, "must be overcome if you are to reach the goal of spiritual purification."

"I agree," he had said on Day Nine. "However, to overcome desires, they must be eliminated, and the only way to eliminate them is to supply what is desired. Ergo, the only way for me to reach spiritual purification is to spend several weeks bouncing up and down on each of those young lovelies."

He had missed dinner two days in a row for that.

Then he had behaved himself relatively well, he thought, until this afternoon's campaign against the masochistic saint.

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Now he lay with his stomach growling, mourning his lack of tact and wishing he could curse Ol' Pete for schlepping him to this dive in the first place.

No one he had known in all his forty years had tsooris like he did now, because the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Rehabilitation Facility was Hell. It was the place where Jewish boys who got tattoos, slept with shiksas, and told dirty toilet jokes went. Not all of the residents had been Jewish boys in life, but they had all become Jewish boys in death because they had a Housemother who expected nothing less than perfection.

The fact that Mrs. Vonus seemed more Methodist, Presbyterian, and/or Baptist than anything else was irrelevant. Leonard had met so many Jewish mothers who acted Presbyterian, and so many Baptist mothers who acted Jewish, that he'd come to the conclusion that they were all interchangeable.

"The only mothers that out-Jewish-mother the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians," he said to the ceiling, "are those Catholic Jewish mothers, who on top of everything else get to complain about their swollen knees. And the only ones who out-Jewish-mother *them* are the Sisters, who remain chaste out of shame that they were born to the goyim."

The disapproving face of Mrs. Vonus appeared above him, and he choked on his own breath. He couldn't get used to her habit of materializing without warning. It might be that she was simply good at sneaking up on him, but he preferred to think that she had the ability to transform herself into a gnat.

"One of your most serious problems," Mrs. Vonus said, "is your apparent inability to comprehend the meaning of the word 'respect.'"

You should talk, Leonard thought before he could stop himself. *I could've been naked in here, doing who knows what vile and perverted things in the absence of female companionship.*

Mrs. Vonus regarded him severely. "I have been placed over you as your teacher and guardian, and I shall do whatever is necessary to further your spiritual development. That includes confronting you when you do not expect it, which will train you to behave properly at all times."

"Oh, I see," Leonard said sarcastically. "Then I can wind up like Saint Whosis there and behave properly to the bitter end, huh?"

The corners of the Housemother's mouth twitched upward for only the second time since Leonard had come to the Home. "You have already had

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your 'bitter end,' Leonard. That you met it as you did is one of the reasons you are here."

Leonard turned onto his right side to face the wall. *I've already got a minus for today,* he thought miserably. *What more can she do to me!*

"What I am going to do," Mrs. Vonus said, "is allow you to do something you love."

All Leonard could think of were the two unsmiling candy-counter women and the various methods he wanted to use to teach them to laugh out loud.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs. Vonus said. "The nonfraternization rule shall never be broken."

Leonard turned back toward the Housemother and gave her a murderous look. "Then just what are you going to allow me to do, O Great Giver of Just Desserts?"

Mrs. Vonus's eyes narrowed. "Be in the Front Parlor in two minutes, or I shall do something I've never done before."

Have an orgasm! Leonard thought, and was immediately horrified at his stupidity.

He was dead now. He was definitely dead now.

Of course you are, schnook. That's the whole problem.

He expected something far worse than a minus for this transgression. He expected the Housemother to wave her hands and start his insides boiling like so much stew.

But what happened was that, for the first time, Mrs. Vonus looked upset. Her face flushed, and she averted her eyes. Her hands fumbled with the handkerchief she always carried.

Oh-ho, Leonard thought, feeling a bright bit of glee. *Methinks I've struck a nerve in this old yenta.*

The Housemother's discomfort, however, came and went in an instant.

"Be in the Parlor in two minutes," she said, "or I shall assign a minus a day in advance — something I have never considered doing to any other resident. How does it feel to be unique, Leonard?"

She turned and waddled out of the room.

If God placed her over me, Leonard thought, *why'd He build her to walk so funny!*

* * *

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8.

THE FURNITURE in the Front Parlor had been arranged in a circle and was occupied by thirty dour men and women, all dressed in stiff black clothing.

"What's this?" Leonard asked as Mrs. Vonus took his arm and pulled him into the center of the circle. "The Inquisition?"

The Housemother handed him a cordless microphone and then sat on a sofa with three unsmiling, horse-faced men.

Instinctively, Leonard spoke into the mike. "Hey, what's the scam?" he said, and was startled when his amplified voice emanated from the walls.

Mrs. Vonus waved a bony hand. "This is what you lived for. A performance."

Leonard's skin began to itch. His body was telling him to get out of there, but he knew better than to try. The carpet would hold him as it always did whenever the Housemother wanted him in a certain place.

He looked at the men and women in black. Their faces seemed to have been molded into perpetual frowns.

"Who are these people?" he asked. "Ex-lawyers?"

Mrs. Vonus gave him her almost-smile. "You spent a large part of your life claiming that you knew what your country stood for and that your judges did not. These are the founders of your nation. Perform for them, and see if they approve."

Leonard scanned the audience. "So where's George Washington? Ben Franklin? Tom Jefferson?"

"Those men came after," Mrs. Vonus said with a strong note of satisfaction in her voice. "These people came to escape persecution. . . ."

Realization hit Leonard like a splash of ice water.

Oh, terrific. She expects me to do my gig for a slavering pack of Puritans.

"Please begin," Mrs. Vonus said.

"Why? So they can tie me up and toss me into the pond out back to see if I float?"

"If you want to eat tomorrow," Mrs. Vonus said, "begin. I am curious to see just how funny they think you are."

Leonard wanted to fling himself onto the Housemother and beat on her head with the microphone, but instead he took a deep breath and let himself free-associate.

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"Puritans, huh?" he began, pacing around the circle and shaking his head. "I hear you were really strict. 'If you don't work, you don't eat.' That was yours, wasn't it? Funny, I knew a rabbi who said it originated with Moses. 'Those crummy Pilgrims!' the rabbi used to say. 'They stole all our best stuff!' But, hey, I believe you, it's yours — you want the Ten Commandments, you can have those, too.

"Don't get me wrong — it was a fine rule, although it might've been more effective if you'd made it 'If you don't work, you don't shtu — shtu—'"

Leonard stopped pacing and glared at Mrs. Vonus. "How am I supposed to do my act if I've got half of my vocabulary blocked?"

"Do you think these people would find that portion funny?" the Housemother asked. "For that matter, would any decent person? If you feel you must be obscene to be funny, then you must not be too intelligent, must you? Shouldn't an intelligent person have better tools at his command?"

Leonard began pacing again, faster than before. "Y'know, I really don't get it with this obscenity hang-up," he said, the words starting to come rapid-fire. "I mean, obscenity is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it? You take this schlepper here —" He stopped pacing and pointed at an especially grim-looking Puritan. "What's a dirty word to you, Jim — how about 'toilet'? Now, of course that's not dirty to you, because you don't have the faintest idea what a toilet *is*, do you? I could stand here and tell you dirty toilet jokes all night long, and you wouldn't be offended because you wouldn't know what I was talking about. But suppose I started talking about witches —"

The Puritan stiffened in his seat.

"Ha, that got you, didn't it?" Leonard half-yelled. "Now *there's* a dirty word. Hey, I've got one — when is a witch not a witch? When the broomstick she's riding belongs to Ye Revered Pastor, Leader of the Flock. 'Cometh ye here, naughty witch,' he sayeth righteously. 'I'll put the fear of the Lord into you. Well, I'll put something into you, anyway, yea verily.'"

Leonard waited for a reaction, but it didn't come.

"Didn't quite catch that one, eh? You guys never were much for subtlety, except when it came to killing off the Indians. What you did was, you drowned, burned, or hanged your witches, but only if they didn't have any social diseases. If they *did* have social diseases, you sent 'em to be social with the Mohicans, sort of your basic cultural exchange program. . . ."

The Puritans sat stone-faced.

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Leonard zeroed in on a matronly woman.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm conducting a survey. Have you ever, you know, had, um, *relations* with a Mohegan? No, I thought not; you look unhappy. You don't follow the logic? Well, look at it this way — who has more stamina, a fat old preacher whose only exercise comes from turning pages in the Good Book" — he gestured at the man sitting next to the woman — "or a copper-skinned nature boy who wears a loincloth and wrestles bears for a living? 'Ugh, that tenth bear me wrestled today. Bring on fourteen white squaws; me got a few weeks' vacation coming.'

"And speaking of Indians — or did you folks call them 'savages' or 'heathens'? — how about that Manhattan Island deal? Bunch of goyim similar to yourselves shelled out twenty-four bucks in beads for a prime chunk of real estate. The kicker, though, is that the savage who sold the island had bought it from God the week before for a sack of rocks, so he went away chuckling because he'd done so well on the deal. . . . 'Those white-eyed schlemiels with the funny hats! What a bunch of suckers!'

"Later on, of course, the white folks felt guilty for taking advantage of the poor ignorant redskins, so they threw in some good used blankets. Who knew the previous owners had died of smallpox?

"Speaking of disease, though, the Indians had the last laugh. They gave us tobacco in exchange for the blankets, and sooner or later all our lips are going to fall off. We're going to be up to our tuchuses in lips, which, ultimately, is what we all want anyway, right? Who says white people are stupid?"

The Puritans were still unsmiling. They clearly understood no more than every fifth word, and that word invariably made their expressions even grimmer.

Leonard was getting no laughs. Ultimately, when he wound down, that would hurt. he would finally run out of things to say, and then he would stand in the center of the circle, drained and defeated.

For now, though, he wouldn't think of that. For now, he was high on his own patter, his own stream of consciousness.

For now, he was on a roll.

". . . and after you boys and girls came over, you discovered that this nation-building business was a real pain, so you imported black men and women to do it for you. You were awfully smart to do that, but not as smart as us Jews. *We* waited until the country was built, and *then* we

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came over. Meantime, of course, we were getting slaughtered wherever else we happened to be living, but we didn't mind, because we knew that eventually we'd get to go to the Promised Land — Brooklyn.

"Oh, I see what you're thinking, sir. You reacted when I identified myself as Jewish, and I know what you want to ask. The answer is Yes, we killed Him. Why? Because He refused to go to med school, that's why...."

Calvin Coolidge looked down disapprovingly.

9.

DURING HIS time in the pillory, Leonard began to think that he finally understood the true horror of the Home: It was exactly like being alive again.

It wasn't that being in the pillory was so bad — at least he was in the backyard beside the pond, which was the best place on the grounds to be if you were trapped in a pillory. Since the pond was near the "northwest" corner of the wooden wall that defined the "eastern," "western," and "northern" boundaries of the mansion's grounds, he not only had a good view of what Mrs. Vonus called "the east yard and arbor," but could see all the way to the road beyond the front yard.

What bothered him wasn't the punishment itself but the fact that he had been forced to perform for people who couldn't possibly understand him, and that the Puritans had been allowed to put him into the pillory simply because they hadn't liked him.

"Well, of course you don't like me, you idiots!" he'd yelled as they had carried him out through the East Doorway. "A caveman wouldn't have liked *you*, either! For that matter, neither do I!"

"I'm terribly sorry, Leonard," Mrs. Vonus had said as the Puritans had latched the pillory. "But you see, they wouldn't have agreed to hear you if I hadn't promised them the opportunity to punish you for your blasphemies. Rest assured that this is the worst I'll let them do. I'll release you in a few hours, after they've gone."

"Gone *where*!" Leonard had wanted to know, but the Housemother had already turned to waddle back to the mansion.

Then, as the sun had gone down, the Puritans had thrown overripe vegetables.

"Now tell me, you bozos," Leonard had cried. "Would Christ have ap-

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proved of this? Would Jesus have thrown the first cabbage?"

A moldy turnip had hit him in the eye.

Now, as he watched a pair of white geese paddle across the pond, it occurred to him that Mrs. Vonus had wanted to pillory him herself, but had let the Puritans do her dirty work. The black-clad fanatics had disappeared at sunrise, but it was midday now and the Housemother still hadn't appeared to release him.

None of the residents walking nervously about the grounds would offer any help. A few of them shrugged their shoulders as if to say, "Tough luck, but I've got my own tsooris, you know?" but most of them simply ignored him.

So Leonard waited as the sun rose higher, watching the geese and smelling the vegetable stuff baking on his face and hands. At least there weren't any flies.

After what felt like several more hours, he raised his eyes and looked past the mansion toward the road. If only it were possible to make a move without Mrs. Vonus knowing about it, someday he would cut a branch and try to pole-vault the ditch so he could run down the dirt road in the direction from which he had come. He wouldn't care where the road went, not even if it led back to the toilet he'd been sitting on when he'd died. He wouldn't even care if he died all over again, as long as it meant that he would ruin the Housemother's plans.

It was an impossible hope. Mrs. Vonus always knew what he was doing, and she always appeared whenever he was about to do something "against the Rules of the Home."

His crotch began to itch.

"Wonderful," he muttered, and rubbed his thighs together. It didn't help.

A flash of red appeared down the road, and then Leonard heard the sound of the International's chugging engine. After a few minutes the pickup truck emerged from behind the trees and stopped.

The passenger door opened, and a stocky, overweight man stepped out. He was wearing the standard brown suit.

"Go back!" Leonard yelled hoarsely. "Throw Ol' Pete in the ditch, hijack the truck, and go back before she's got you!"

The stranger peered in Leonard's direction, but didn't follow the instructions. He began to cross the narrow footbridge that had reappeared

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with the arrival of the International.

The pickup's horn blared, and the stranger flailed, nearly falling into the ditch.

Engager in filthy activity with sows, Leonard thought, wishing he could remember the words that really expressed what he thought of Ol' Pete.

He watched the newcomer totter across the footbridge and then look back, just as he had done. The truck had vanished.

Shaking his head, the stocky man stepped onto the walk that led to the front door.

"Hey!" Leonard yelled, trying to force his voice to overcome its hoarseness. "Don't go that way! Come on back here! Back here, schnook!"

The stranger paused.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you!" Leonard shouted. C'mere and get me out of this thing!"

The stranger came toward the pond, and as he drew near, the puzzled expression on his broad, doughy face became more evident.

"I'm Leonard," Leonard said when the stranger was close enough to hear unshouted words.

"Uh, pleased to meet you," the newcomer said uncertainly. "I'm —" He peered at the copper band on his wrist. "—John, I guess." His voice sounded like a combination of a baby's gurgle and an old man's cough.

"Well, that might be in your favor," Leonard said. "You're named after the Housemother's hero, sort of. Is 'John' all it says?"

John looked at his bracelet more closely. "Why? Should it say something else?"

Leonard tried to shrug, but the pillory wouldn't let him. "I've been trying to figure out if 'Leonard' is my first name or my last, and nobody else will let me look at their bracelets. But if yours just says 'John,' it's got to be a first name.

"Who says? What about Elton John?"

"Is that who you are?"

John looked surprised. "Do I look like Elton John?"

Leonard tried to shrug again. "How should I know? I never heard of the guy."

"Where have you been the past fifteen years?" John asked, incredulous.

"Dead," Leonard said. "Get me out of this thing, will you? I got an

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itch. Find something to break the lock."

John squinted. "There isn't a lock. Just a latch, like a toolbox, you know?"

Leonard was finding it difficult to be patient. His crotch felt as if a thousand crabs had settled down to lunch.

"So quit kibitzing and unlatch it already!" he yelled.

John reached for the latch, then paused and eyed Leonard suspiciously. "Am I going to get in trouble for this?"

"No!" Leonard shouted, not caring that he might be lying. "Now either get me outta here or scratch me where my pants are binding me!"

John raised an eyebrow in a way that Leonard supposed meant, "Hmmmm . . . interesting proposition," and then unlatched the pillory.

Leonard flung off the upper board, jammed his hands into his pants pockets, and scratched vigorously.

"That's disgusting," John said, and began to scratch himself in a similar fashion.

Leonard's first impulse was to snarl at the newcomer for mocking him, but then he realized that John's exaggerated mugging and scratching were *funny*.

"You should talk about disgusting," Leonard said. "You look like a sex-starved gorilla."

"I *am* a sex-starved gorilla," John said emphatically, and began lurching around the pond, waving his arms and screeching like a chimpanzee.

Leonard had a feeling that he was going to like this guy.

10.

"I'LL THANK you not to bother our new resident," a thin, high-pitched voice said behind him.

Leonard's heart seemed to drop into his stomach and jump back up. Mrs. Vonus had sneaked up on him again.

He turned and glared at her. "I was merely making his acquaintance," he said. "He was kind enough to let me out of that Pilgrim peep show, which you promised you'd do a long time ago."

"I promised no such thing," Mrs. Vonus said.

"Bullsh — Bull —," Leonard began, then gave up and fumed.

Mrs. Vonus waddled a few steps closer to the pond.

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"Please come with me, John," she called. "We must begin your orientation. My name is Mrs. Vonus."

John, still an ape, screeched in happy mock recognition and scampered to the Housemother.

Leonard grinned.

"That will be enough of that, John," Mrs. Vonus said.

John made ooh-oohing noises and began to probe Mrs. Vonus's blue-gray helmet of hair with his thick fingers.

Leonard laughed. It would probably earn him a minus, but he didn't care. He was getting to the point where he didn't miss dessert that much, anyway.

"Stop this instant, John," Mrs. Vonus said.

Her voice was so deadly cold that Leonard's laughter died.

John continued to search for lice.

"You have two seconds," Mrs. Vonus said.

Leonard started toward John, intending to pull him away, but he was too late.

John stiffened convulsively, and his eyes rolled back. Then he crumpled to the grass, landing on his side with a faint "whuff."

Leonard knelt beside him and gently slapped his cheeks. He had to do something, because if he didn't, he would go for the Housemother's throat.

"He is quite all right," Mrs. Vonus said. "In any case, it is none of your affair."

I hate you, Leonard thought in a red heat. *I hate your scrawny guts, you miserable old yenta. You exist only to dictate rules, just like those self-righteous religion pimps back home.*

"Unless you wish to feel what John has just felt," Mrs. Vonus said, "I suggest you redirect your thoughts. I also suggest that you take a stroll about the grounds. Now."

Leonard stood stiffly and walked toward the back wall.

"Stand up, John," he heard the Housemother say. "There is a film I think you should see."

"A movie?" John's slurred voice said. "I love movies. I think I've been in some. . . ."

You can bet you'll be in this one, Jim, Leonard thought as he forced his eyes to stay focused on the wall that was too high to scale. *You'll goddamn sure be in this one.*

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I'm already dead, Leonard thought, so what have I got to lose?

He stopped short.

He had just thought one of the forgotten, forbidden words.

He waited for the lightning to strike, but it didn't come. Then he tried to think of the word again, but it was gone.

No matter. The chink in the armor had been tiny, but it had been there. All he had to do was make it bigger.

To discover how to do that, he would need an ally.

The way to start, he decided, was to do something he knew was against the Rules of the Home.

He would wait until Mrs. Vonus and John were inside the mansion. Then he would follow and hide until the Housemother had finished showing the newcomer the portrait and the Progress Board. He would watch for his chance to sneak into the theater, and then —

He would watch the screening of John's death. Maybe he could find some way to use the film against Mrs. Vonus before she had a chance to use it against John.

I'm already dead, Leonard thought as he pretended to wander aimlessly about the backyard, *so what have I got to lose?*

When Mrs. Vonus and John were almost to the East Door, Leonard went to the pond and washed the dried vegetable stuff from his face and hair. It was time to prepare for battle.

11.

LEONARD WAITED in a shadow in the hall a few yards away from the entrance to the lobby. He saw Mrs. Vonus open one of the double doors and usher John into the theater, then watched as she went behind the candy counter.

For a moment he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to get in without her seeing him, but then she opened a panel in the wall and disappeared up a flight of steps. Apparently, her powers didn't include turning on the projector by telekinesis.

The two women behind the candy counter would be a problem, but

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Leonard decided to take his chances. He stepped into the lobby and strode across to the double doors.

"Excuse me, sir," the blonde said. "The main feature does not begin for thirty minutes."

Leonard didn't slow down. "Yes, I know I'm late, sorry," he said, then opened the right-hand door and stepped into the darkness. He sat in the back row, not wanting to find John until he had some idea of how to approach him.

After a half minute the screen brightened and the Housemother's introductory spiel began. Leonard fidgeted in his seat, wanting desperately to shout an insult at the giant Mrs. Vonus-image to see whether he could remember that word again.

When the death film began, Leonard experienced such a strong sense of déjà vu that he wondered whether he had known John in life. But as the film progressed, he realized that the feeling came from the fact that John's death was remarkably like his own.

In the grainy black and white, John overdosed and died.

There were differences, of course: The camera eye didn't remain stationary, but roamed from room to room, following John as he blundered through his final minutes. And there was a woman who gave him the injection, but she left before the end.

Finally, John lay on a bed, alone and still. Someone came into the frame and tried to revive him, then shouted angrily.

The final shot was a close-up of John's puffy face, the swollen tongue pushing out between dark lips.

The screen went black, and Leonard heard soft moaning noises.

Give the guy a few minutes of privacy, he thought. *Everybody ought to have a little time alone when they die.*

"I coulda," John moaned.

Leonard tried not to listen, but John's voice became louder with each syllable.

"I coulda," John said again. "I coulda gone back to New York. I coulda saved my stupid fat. . . ."

There was a long pause, and then an explosive bellow:

"But NOOOOOOOOOOO. NOOOOOOOOO, I had to stay in HOLLY-WOOD so I could get off on a speedball and be COOOOOL."

Leonard was impressed. Better to rail than to whimper and slide farther down in your seat.

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The double doors opened, throwing a slanted shaft of yellow light down the aisle, and Leonard stood quickly so he could sit beside John before any of the others did. He didn't want the newcomer to meet anyone with JuJus before he had a chance to warn him.

12.

LEONARD FOUND John in the same seat he had chosen on his own first day.

"Mind if I sit here?" Leonard asked, indicating the seat on John's right.

John looked at him through slitted eyes for a moment and then turned to face the screen again, shrugging his substantial shoulders.

Leonard sat down. "Whatever you do," he said, "don't take candy from these schmoes. It turns into bugs in the mouth of anyone except the guy who bought it."

John glanced at him. "Uh-huh."

"I'm serious," Leonard said. "The Housemother would rather you found out on your own, because she enjoys torturing schlimazels like you and me. I'm telling you in advance to save you the grief."

"Thanks," John said. "Now shut up. The movie's starting."

The screen was brightening, and Leonard closed his eyes even though he knew he wouldn't be able to keep them shut. He smelled popcorn somewhere behind him and hated whoever had been "good" enough to get the money to buy it.

"All right!" John yelped. "Jimmy Stewart!"

Leonard opened his eyes and shuddered. "You won't be so pleased after a while," he said.

"Are you kidding? *It's a Wonderful Life* is great!"

"Once, maybe, or even ten times if they're spread out over a few years. But not every afternoon for all eternity."

John shifted his bulk, jostling Leonard's elbow off the armrest. "What're you talking about?"

"Haven't you figured it out? Didn't Mrs. Vonus show you the Progress Board before she hustled you in here?"

"Yeah, but she's senile, isn't she? Hey — no more talk, O.K.?"

On the screen, the absurd nebulae-angels began discussing the poor

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soul who was about to take his own life.

Just once, Leonard thought, *I wish they'd let George croak himself. Let him leap into the ice-cold river. That's all, folks, thanks for coming. Frank Capra has suckered you, man.*

But it happened the way it always did — the ice-sledding accident, the distraught druggist, the swimming-pool-under-the-gym-floor, the evil banker, the war-hero brother, the insufferably cute children, the bumbling, wingless angel named Clarence —

Leonard wanted to scream, but he didn't. He had, once, on Day Six, and had been served burnt gristle for dinner. He also knew better than to try to walk out. His seat wouldn't let him up until the last frame had whisked through the projector.

So he resigned himself to sitting through it again, miserable and thoroughly angry at John, who, despite his outburst after seeing his death, didn't seem to care that he was stuck here.

What was wrong with him, anyway?

For that matter, what was wrong with *all* of these schmendricks? Hadn't they ever considered the possibility that where one failed, many could succeed?

Or did Mrs. Vonus see to it that new residents arrived at long intervals, so she'd be able to break the spirit of each one before Ol' Pete brought the next?

It made sense, considering the nature of time at the Home. A hundred comedians might die in the same hour, but they'd arrive singly, one every fifteen or twenty "days," if that was the interval chosen by the Housemother.

Or by someone else?

If Mrs. Vonus chose the length of the interval, how could her failure to tame Leonard before John's arrival be explained?

Now that he thought about it, it seemed to Leonard that the previous night's performance for the Puritans and his subsequent imprisonment in the pillory had been the Housemother's last-ditch attempts to bring him into line before she had to concentrate on breaking in a newcomer.

That would explain how he had managed to remember that word: Mrs. Vonus had been preoccupied with John.

She was not omnipotent.

Leonard grinned. If he could enlist John's help before she sank her

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claws into him too deeply, they could bounce her back and forth between them like a Ping-Pong ball.

For what purpose? he wondered. *What good will that do me? Will it get me out of here?*

He brushed the questions out of his mind. Maybe running the Housemother ragged wouldn't accomplish anything; maybe he was bound here by forces beyond those she commanded. It didn't matter.

To rebel was to be doing something because *he* wanted to do it. That was enough.

13.

"PUNCH HIM out, Jimmy!" John yelled, startling Leonard out of his thoughts. "Give the old fu — fu —"

John paused, and in the dim reflected light, Leonard could see an expression of confusion on the pudgy face.

"— the old fuddy-duddy a clop in the chops!" John concluded.

Leonard laughed.

"Sshhhhhh!" someone several rows behind them hissed. "Quiet, or I'll report you to the Housemother."

Leonard looked back over his shoulder.

"Dracula had his human henchmen, too," he said loudly. "Eat your flies and leave us alone."

"Fuddy-duddy?" John said, obviously bewildered by his own description of Lionel Barrymore. "*Fuddy-duddy?*"

Leonard leaned closer to him. "You beginning to get the drift? I had to deal with censorship in my life, and maybe you did in yours, but at least it was censorship you could see, censorship you could fight. Here they censor your *mind* so that you can't even think of what you want to say in the first place."

"How . . . how can they do that?" John seemed torn between listening to Leonard and watching the movie.

"'How' I don't know," Leonard said, "but 'why' is no problem. Because this is Hell, or maybe Purgatory, where they punish you for your sins. And it's a rigged wheel, because they also decide what constitutes 'sin' in the first place."

"Who are 'they,' anyhow?"

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"I don't know for sure, but they're represented by Mrs. Vonus. She's not known for excessive kindness to the recently deceased."

John made a derisive noise through his nostrils. "That little old lady? She's about as dangerous as a lobotomized gerbil."

"You forgetting what she did to you out back?"

"Sshhhh!" the resident behind them hissed again.

"Somebody back there spring a leak?" John yelled.

"Pay no attention," Leonard said. "They're whining lackeys. Besides, they'll see this again tomorrow. That's the power of a lobotomized gerbil — whether you want to or not, you'll be here again tomorrow afternoon. She'll hook that invisible claw of hers into your brain and drag you here. If you try to resist, she'll send you to bed without dinner for a day or two."

John drummed his thick fingers on the armrest. "Let me get this straight. I have to come back here at the same time tomorrow. And I'm going to see the same movie?"

"Bingo, bubee."

"Well, he — he — heck, then, I don't need to see the rest of it now. I've already missed too much listening to you, so I might as well go find something to eat."

John struggled to stand. When he finally gave up, he slumped like a chubby wrestler who had just lost a long, painful bout. Sweat glistened on his cheeks and forehead.

"See what I mean?" Leonard said. "If this doesn't qualify as Hell, I don't know what does."

"Certain portions of Utah," John said, panting heavily.

Leonard smiled. Mrs. Vonus would probably crush them both eventually, but he had a feeling that they were going to give her a run for her money.

That feeling grew stronger when John, having recovered from his struggle, straightened in his seat and began heckling the characters on the screen.

"Come on, you jerk!" John yelled. "Take an ax to the piano if it bugs you! Whop the kid up side the head!"

And later: "G'wan, jump! The water's dee-lightful!"

And still later: "You talk like a sissy, Clarence!"

Toward the end of the film, Leonard decided to get into the act.

"Merry Christmas, Main Street!" he cried. "Merry Christmas, old build-

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ing and loan! Merry Christmas, old movie theater! Merry Christmas, old five-and-dime! Merry Christmas, old cathouse!"

John guffawed and then bellowed, "Merry Christmas, old chuckhole! Merry Christmas, old dirty bookstore! Merry Christmas, old dog-frozen-to-the-fire-hydrant!"

"Merry Christmas, old social-disease clinic!" Leonard shouted.

By now the scene of Stewart-as-George-Bailey running down Main Street was over, but Leonard and John didn't care. They were on a roll.

"Merry Christmas, old drunk in the alley!" John yelled.

"Merry Christmas, old bird-do on the sidewalk!" Leonard cried.

Something strange happened then, something Leonard never would have expected.

A few other dead comedians joined them in their heckling, and then a few more.

"Merry Christmas, old mashed cat in the gutter!"

"Merry Christmas, old rats in the sewer!"

"Merry Christmas, old tires at the gas station!"

Before long, the sound track was drowned out by the shouts. Leonard thought he even heard the voice of whoever had tried to quiet him earlier.

"Merry Christmas, old jokes on the john wall!"

"Merry Christmas, old strippers on the stage!"

"Merry Christmas, old scotch-and-soda!"

"Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Rear!"

"Merry Men, save Robin Hood!"

"Marry me, darling!"

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary. . . ."

It degenerated into lunacy, and Leonard felt happier than he had at any moment since dying.

The movied ended as it always did, with the bell on the Christmas tree ringing and the little girl in Jimmy Stewart's arms expressing the opinion that some angel was getting his wings. This time, though, when Stewart said, "That's right," John shouted, "That's ridiculous!"

Leonard decided that was the perfect response, so he added his own, "Yeah, that's ridiculous!"

Before the credits came on, the whole audience was chanting, "That's ridiculous! That's ridiculous! That's ridiculous!"

"Merely silly!" someone cried between chants.

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Joy thrilled up in Leonard, giving him a greater rush than he'd ever gotten from horse. The Revolution, he was sure, had begun at last.

14.

BUT THE joy was more like the transitory ecstasy of a narcotic than Leonard had thought. As soon as the lights came up, the chanting stopped, and the other residents hurried out of the theater like frightened mice.

John stood up and yelled, "Any of you guys play the blues?"

A few of the residents glanced back, but none answered.

"Forget it, man," Leonard said sullenly. "I thought we might've put a spark into them, but they were just having flashbacks to when they had some guts, to when they were alive. She's got them under her thumb."

The last of the others disappeared beyond the double doors, leaving Leonard and John alone.

John's stomach growled so loudly that the sound echoed off the walls.

"This is the first movie I've ever sat through without at least a box of popcorn," he said. "Where can I get something to eat around here?"

"You can't," Leonard said.

"Whaddaya mean, I can't? I'm hungry, aren't I? I've gotta eat if I'm hungry, don't I?"

Leonard stood and moved toward the aisle. "The dinner bell rings a few hours or a few days after the movie, depending on your time sense. You get to the dining room by going through the Front Parlor. You know, Calvin's room."

John walked beside him toward the double doors. "Hey, I can't wait. I'm hungry *now*."

"Me, too. But I doubt that the Housemother'll let me eat today. I've been a bad boy."

"I didn't figure you were wearing a wooden collar to be stylish. But I'll get to eat, won't I?"

"That's up to her," Leonard said, pushing open the doors. "In all fairness, though — hanging out with me won't do you much good in that department. I'm on her excrement list."

"Don't you mean sh — sh —," John said as they stepped into the lobby. He stopped and frowned.

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Leonard paused and studied John's face. The heavy eyebrows were angled and pushed together so that the frown seemed almost a parody of the expression.

"Weren't you listening to what I said about censorship?" Leonard asked. "Haven't you caught on yet?"

John seemed about to answer, but then his eyes shifted to the candy counter. His expression changed abruptly, and he nudged Leonard in the ribs.

"Women and junk food," he said eagerly. "I noticed 'em before, but the gerbil was with me." He headed toward the counter.

"You're wasting your time," Leonard said.

John looked back over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "I've got nothing *but* time, Jack." He turned toward the counter again.

Leonard considered heading for his room to avoid seeing John's coming humiliation, but there was nothing waiting for him there except the picture of the saint-about-to-become-chopped-liver.

He reached the counter at the same time as John. Together they leaned with their elbows on the glass countertop and leered at the women.

John waggled his eyebrows lasciviously. "Helloooo," he said. "I couldn't help but notice that there are two of you ladies and two of us gentlemen. A convenient coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

The women stared blankly.

"Arithmetic seems to be beyond them," Leonard said.

"I don't care if they can count," John said. "I don't even care if they can talk. I'll take the blonde, you take the brunette. Deal?"

"Sure. Just out of curiosity, though, how do you plan to convince them of the reasonableness of the arrangement?"

"Sheer animal charm," John said, and vaulted over the counter with far more ease than Leonard would have thought possible for a man of his bulk.

"Which animal?" Leonard asked. "An orangutan, maybe?"

"Maybe," John said, and grabbed the blonde around the waist, dipping her backward as if he were Rhett Butler and she were Scarlett O'Hara.

Leonard winked at the brunette and started clambering over the counter.

"Baby," John was saying in a bad imitation of Clark Gable, "you're for me."

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"I suggest you release me immediately," the blonde said.

"Better turn up the animal charm a notch or two," Leonard said, swiveling on his belly on the countertop.

"I cannot release you, *mon cher*," John said, his lips less than an inch above the woman's. "We're bound together by invisible diamond chains of hot volcanic love."

Leonard landed heavily on the tiled floor inside the U of the counter, slipping a little on a slick of spilled popcorn butter. "'Invisible diamond chains of hot volcanic love?'" he asked.

"Shut up," John said. "Can't you see I'm seducing this woman?"

"Release me now," the blonde said.

John planted his lips on hers in what appeared to Leonard to be the sloppiest kiss in history.

Leonard grinned at the brunette. "I'd hate to feel left out, wouldn't you?"

"You might find it preferable," she said.

Leonard moved a step closer. "Oh, I don't think —"

The rest of his sentence was cut off by John's scream.

Leonard whirled and saw his friend locked in an embrace with a catfish-woman.

She had arms and legs, but they were sickly gray, *slimy* arms and legs. Her head, although still covered with blonde hair, had transformed into that of a scaleless fish, complete with whiskerlike barbels.

John was writhing in the creature's embrace, spitting frantically.

"For the love of — pahhh!" he cried. "She tastes like rancid cat food!"

Leonard glanced back at the brunette woman, who still looked delectably human, and said, "Maybe some other time."

"I doubt it," she said.

John tore away from the catfish-woman, shoving her to the floor in the process, and lunged for the candy counter.

"Gotta get that taste outta my mouth!" he yelled, and grabbed several boxes of Junior Mints.

"That will be six dollars," the brunette said.

"Don't," Leonard said, grabbing John's arm. "They'll start crawling in your mouth."

John twisted away and ripped open the boxes, dumping their contents onto the countertop. Dozens of chocolate-coated mint-buttons rolled and slid across the glass.

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"They don't look alive to me, bud!" John yelled.

Leonard stared at them. Maybe the thing with the cockroaches happened only if you ate candy that someone else had bought. No one had bought this stuff yet, so —

"Junior Mints, prepare to meet thy doom!" John roared, and squatted so that his mouth was at the edge of the counter.

The cat-fish woman flopped on the tile floor and made a gurgling noise.

Leonard gave her a sidelong look. "No offense, sweetheart, but you've got an odor problem."

John began scooping the candies into his mouth with both hands, making small noises of pleasure as he chewed.

The scents of chocolate and mint overpowered the fish-stink and filled Leonard's head, making him dizzy. He resisted for several seconds, but when he was that nothing was happening to John, he decided to grab some candy before it was all gone.

He knelt beside his friend.

"I feel like a Catholic who just hit the Host jackpot," he said, and shoved a handful of mints into his mouth.

"You must stop immediately," the brunette woman's voice said behind him. The warning was accompanied by the sounds of the blonde's flopping and gurgling.

Leonard ignored them and concentrated on his feast. Even when Mrs. Vonus let him eat, the food was relentlessly bland, but this — this was smooth, creamy, minty, and luxuriously chocolaty. He reveled in it, filling his mouth with a huge blob of sweetness.

For a second he thought he was no longer in Hell, but Heaven.

Then something squirmed out of the blob and tried to slither down his throat.

He gagged, and as he spun away from the counter, he heard John give a strangled cry.

I knew better, Leonard thought as he saw the writhing mass he had spit onto the white tile.

Worms and slugs.

I knew better, and I did it anyway.

He felt nausea, but no regret.

* * *

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15.

YES, YOU did know better, Leonard," Mrs. Vonus said. "Why are you so self-destructive?"

He looked up and saw her standing over him. He wasn't surprised to see her.

John was crawling across the floor like an overweight dog. "Oh mother," he moaned. "Bad acid. Bad, bad acid. I knew I'd get flashbacks, I *knew* it, but NOOOOOOOOO, I had to have three tabs, and six years later, here they are again."

Leonard stood and wiped his mouth on his jacket sleeve. "You're not flashing back. This is what's happening. And this" — he nodded toward Mrs. Vonus — "is who's doing it to you. She claims she's trying to mold us into perfection, but she really means to crush our spirits, not build them up."

"You're confusing 'spirit' and 'will,'" the Housemother said. "'Will' is the evil part of man and has always been his downfall. Only by denying the will can you be saved."

Leonard tugged on John's left arm, trying to pull him to his feet. To his surprise, the brunette woman grasped John's right arm and helped.

"That isn't necessary, Melody," Mrs. Vonus said sharply.

"Nice name," Leonard told the brunette as they brought John to a standing position. "Thanks."

Melody looked down. Leonard's eyes followed, and he saw that the blonde had flopped across the floor and was gulping the worms and slugs.

John was swaying back and forth and beginning to babble nonsense.

"— ponies jump sniff good hot mother don't needle ah yes Baskin-Robbins —"

Leonard couldn't tell whether it was an act or not.

"Come on, friend," he said. "Let's get out of here." He tugged John toward the narrow gap between the end of the candy counter and the wall.

"Another resident will show John to his room," Mrs. Vonus said. "I would rather you didn't have any further contact with him."

Leonard was maneuvering the chunky man through the gap with some difficulty; John's belly had folded over the countertop and didn't want to move.

"— tutti-frutti all over the redeye Louie Louie —"

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"What are you gonna do?" Leonard asked the Housemother. "Baby-sit him constantly so he doesn't meet me in the hall or the backyard? Well, that's fine with me, because if you're with him, you can't be nudzhing me. Here, he's all yours."

Leonard left John stuck in the gap and clambered over the counter again, kicking a few stray Junior Mints across the lobby.

It was only when one of the mints bounced off a resident's forehead that Leonard noticed eight other comedians standing in the mouth of the hallway.

"What are you guys doing here?" he asked. He had never seen anyone loiter in or near the lobby after the movie. "Enjoying the floor show? What'd you think of the amazing fish-faced bimbo?" He glanced back and saw that the blonde was in human form again.

"These gentlemen are my most advanced residents, and they aren't here for amusement," Mrs. Vonus said. "Four of them are being assigned as companions to John, and four are being assigned as companions to you. At least one will be near you at all times and will report any problems."

Leonard stopped in the center of the lobby and stared at the eight men facing him. They seemed so incredibly dull — as if they were all from Buffalo, New York — that he found it hard to believe that any of them had ever made it in comedy.

But they had, or they wouldn't have been brought to the Home in the first place.

Realizing that, he studied their placid faces and saw what Mrs. Vonus wanted to turn him into. He saw the truth of Afterlife:

The way to move up the Hill, to get to a Better Place, was to resign himself to an Eternity of white-bread complacency and ordinariness. To become a thing of flesh-colored clay.

To become a golem.

He backed away from them. "Oh no, you don't. You don't transform four of these schmendricks into my shadows, lady. Where this Jewish boy walks, he walks alone. Or, if not alone, then in the company of a good-looking chick."

"You have no choice in the matter," the Housemother said. "Frederick, you shall take the first shift with Leonard. Albert, you shall take the first shift with John."

Two of the white-bread golems stepped forward.

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Leonard held up a fist. "Who wants to be the first to sing soprano?"

"If you touch your companion," Mrs. Vonus said, "you will experience pain three times as intense as what you experienced for trying to alter the Progress Board."

John, who had been babbling quietly since getting stuck between the wall and counter, now shouted, "You useless weenies!"

Leonard turned and saw the fat man squeeze himself out of the gap like a cork out of a bottleneck.

"What are you, men or mothballs?" John yelled, pointing at the golems.

"Mothballs?" Leonard said.

"Whatsa mattayou pimple-brains?" John bellowed, gesticulating so vigorously that his paunch shook like gelatin. "Don'tcha know when you're being walked all over? Are you just going to sit back and take it? Did Custer sit back and take it when the Japanese attacked? Did Joan of Arc let her religion stop her from eating her enemies raw without salt? Did Dagwood cower like a whipped dog when Mr. Dithers hit him with a typewriter? You bet he didn't, boy! He went ahead and asked for a raise anyway, and when Mr. Dithers hit him with another typewriter, he asked *again*! And here you are, standing like doofs with your elbows up your noses, afraid to —"

John turned toward Leonard and whispered, "What are they afraid to do?"

"Anything," Leonard said. "Everything."

John's face took on an expression of exaggerated disgust. "What a bunch of wimps," he said.

"Enough nonsense," Mrs. Vonus said. "Frederick, Albert — please take these gentlemen to their rooms. If they are reluctant, touch them lightly. Neither of them will be allowed to eat this evening. Lock them in their rooms until you've finished your own meals, then allow them the freedom of the grounds as long as they do not meet. You will be relieved in the morning."

The brown-haired Presbyterian-looking golem named Frederick gestured to Leonard, and the brown-haired Presbyterian-looking golem named Albert gestured to John.

"Sorry, friend," Leonard said to John. "Looks like I got you into trouble after all."

John went into a sumo wrestler's stance. "Trouble? Ha! I'll show these

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guys trouble. Trouble is my middle name. I'm John T. Something-or-Other. Let 'em at me. I'll eat their gallbladders. I'll stomp their toes. I'll move their kneecaps to their ankles. I'll put black dots on their teeth and play dominoes. I'll —"

The golem called Albert walked up to John and brushed his wrist with a fingertip. John sat down on the scarlet carpet.

"— do whatever you say," he mumbled.

Leonard charged at Albert. Before he could get there, a spear of heat stabbed from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

He found himself kneeling before Frederick. He looked up at the white-bread face through a red-and-black checkerboard of pain and said, "I wish you were an enemy plane and I were on the U.S.S. *Brooklyn* so I could do horrible things to you with a five-inch deck gun."

The golem gestured for Leonard to stand. Leonard did so, after three tries, and was about to help John up, but stopped when Frederick shook his head.

"He won't make it without me," Leonard said.

Mrs. Vonus came around the candy counter and waddled toward the hallway.

"That's where you're wrong," she said. "He'll 'make it' perfectly well without you, and you without him. If you meet again, it will be because I have decided that there will be some benefit to both of you as a result. I do not expect that day to arrive for quite some time."

The Housemother entered the hall and was gone.

The brunette woman, Melody, came around the counter and helped John to his feet. The blonde frowned at her but said nothing.

John looked pale and disoriented. As his eyes refocused, he stared at Melody as if seeing her for the first time. "Are you one of my groupies?" he asked, slurring the words.

Leonard noticed that Melody flushed slightly. He managed to smile at her, although it made his teeth hurt. "How'd a nice chick like you wind up working for the Gestapo Queen? I'd've thought you'd have gone to the Florence Nightingale Home for Knockout Angels of Mercy."

Melody returned to the other side of the counter. "I was given the opportunity to volunteer," she said. "How about you . . . sir?"

Leonard shrugged, even though that hurt, too. "I was drafted."

Frederick gestured at him again.

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"Gotta go now," Leonard said, waving to both John and Melody. "Command performance in my room. There's this saint about to be made into bratwurst who wants to laugh before she dies."

"A challenge!" John cried, a little weakly. "Did Magellan give up getting to the South Pole just because it was a challenge? Did Alexander Graham Bell throw out the penicillin just because it was a little moldy? Did Abe Lincoln stop being president just because he got shot?"

"Yes," Leonard said, and headed for the hallway. Each step sent a red rush of pain boiling into his head.

"Oh," he heard John say behind him. "Darn that Abe Lincoln, anyway."

Yeah, Leonard thought. *Darn it all to heck.*

16.

WITHIN FIVE sunrises, Leonard was spending all of his free time in his room, coming downstairs only for mandatory activities — sing-alongs (endless repetitions of the Doxology), meals (one out of three dinners he was allowed to eat consisted of boiled liver and brussels sprouts), and the daily movie (after a while he was so bored that he even stopped wishing Jimmy Stewart would jump into the bush after the possibly nude Donna Reed).

At least one of four guards, his golem for the day, was always with him. When he lay on his bed, the golem sat on a hard-backed chair beside the door. When he awoke in the morning, the golem accompanied him down the hall to the communal bathroom. When he went to the afternoon movie, the golem sat beside him.

None of the four would talk to him or do anything besides watch him. Leonard began calling them all "Fred," knowing he would be right at least 25 percent of the time.

"Hey, Fred," he said on the seventh evening, lying on his bed after a dinner that thankfully, blessedly, had not been liver and brussels sprouts, "tell me a story."

Frederick sat on his chair, looking like an embalmed corpse in the weak yellow light given off by the kerosene lamp on the nightstand.

"Don't feel like it, huh?" Leonard said. "O.K., then, explain things to me. Explain why this place has electricity — you've gotta have electricity to run a movie projector, right? — but every lamp has a wick instead of a light bulb."

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Fred didn't even blink.

Leonard sat up. "You don't seem to understand," he said, the muscles in his throat becoming taut as stretched steel cables. "I have to have a conversation. You won't let me near the candy counter, so I can't even say hello to Melody or the amphibious bimbo. I see John only at distances of twenty yards or more. And talking to Mrs. Vonus is like trying to chum up to my executioner. So here's the deal: I'm going to talk to you, and you're going to talk to me, or I'm going to take off your head, Fred."

Leonard searched the golem's face for some evidence that he was getting through — a muscle twitch, an eye movement, anything — and found nothing.

"All right," he said slowly, "if you're shy, I'll go first. The topic we'll begin with is Early Trauma: When I was in seventh grade, I stole the money from my school's Red Cross drive so I could buy a pair of sneakers for gym class. I was caught, and my father, in addition to beating me up, never forgave me for the shame I had brought upon him. Your turn."

Frederick remained still and silent.

"C'mon, Fred," Leonard said, "surely you can remember something of your life before death, of life before servitude to an ancient and vindictive Daisy Duck."

A muscle in Frederick's left cheek twitched, but that was all.

"I'm going to count to five," Leonard said, pressing the balls of his feet against the hardwood floor and tensing on the edge of the bed, "and then I'm tearing out your esophagus. One, two, three, four —"

He paused, waiting for Frederick to do something, or at least to warn him again of the penalty Mrs. Vonus had imposed for touching a golem. But Frederick did nothing.

Leonard had no desire to feel the pain he knew he would feel when his fingers touched his guard's skin, but he had committed himself. He had told the golem he would attack, and to fail to do so would be to demonstrate that the Housemother had frightened him into obedience, that she had won.

"Five!" he yelled, and launched himself across the room.

In the instant before his hands closed on Frederick's throat, he saw the golem smile.

Then he fell into an inferno of blue-tinged pain.

When it faded, he found himself lying on his side looking up at the

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ecstatic saint. His shoulders throbbed violently, and his arms felt as if they had almost been torn off.

Groaning, he turned onto his back and saw Frederick sitting like God on Judgment Day, looking down on him with an expression similar to that of the *Mona Lisa*.

The throbbing subsided to a painful tingle, and Leonard pushed himself up to a sitting position.

"That made you happy, didn't it, Fred?" he asked.

Fred's expression didn't change.

"I'm glad," Leonard said. "If you're taking pleasure in my pain, that means I've broken your spirituality a little. They don't want sadists on the Hill, do they?"

Frederick's half-smile faded, and Leonard was pleased to see that the golem actually looked distressed.

He hadn't been able to strangle the jerk, but he had accomplished something anyway.

With that realization, Leonard knew what he would do next.

What was the saying? *That which does not kill us makes us stronger*, wasn't it? And who had said it? Plato? Nietzsche? Teddy Roosevelt? John Wayne? The coyote from the Road Runner cartoons?

Doesn't matter, Leonard thought. *The point is, nothing can kill me, on account of I'm already dead. So pain can only make me stronger . . . in theory, anyhow.*

He struggled up to his feet. "Don't worry, Freddy boy. I'm going to give you another chance to turn the other cheek."

He took a deep breath and fell on the golem before he could change his mind. His hands closed around Frederick's throat, and a razor of pain slit his arms, shoulders, and head.

He felt his eyeballs boiling, his teeth shattering.

But he held on.

A second razor followed the first, and he thought he screamed. He wasn't sure, because he couldn't hear anything except a thundering rush of white noise.

But he held on.

Then came the third razor, and the red-and-black checkerboard pattern flooded in.

But, until the last half second of consciousness, he held on.

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When he came to, Leonard knew that he had not been out long. He was on his knees beside Frederick's chair, and the golem was looking down at him with something in his eyes that might be fear.

Forcing a grin, Leonard stood shakily, staggered to the bed, and sat down.

"I'm going to rest a few minutes, Fred ol' buddy ol' pal," he said, surprised at the strength of his voice, "and then we'll try it again."

"I will report," the golem said. The three words were the first that any of the guards had spoken.

"So go ahead," Leonard said. "Let's see what she comes up with this time. Variety is the spice of life." He chuckled, and winced at the pain in his chest. "Or, in this case, death."

When the pain subsided, he walked across the room and jabbed his right index finger into Frederick's shoulder. The jolt sent him stumbling backward, but he didn't fall.

He jabbed the golem again. And again.

It hurt horribly, but after several more jabs, he began to think that he might be able to get used to pain, just as he had gotten used to the tattoo he'd had in life.

"You can hit me back if you like," he said as he continued to jab.

Frederick didn't answer, but now Leonard was sure that the look in his guard's eyes was fear.

When he finally lay on his bed again, exhausted and half-paralyzed with pain, Leonard winked at the saint on his wall.

17.

MRS. VONUS called him down to the foyer two nights later, and he had to restrain himself from laughing when he saw that John, without his guard, was there, too.

He had to restrain himself because laughing was extremely painful.

"Frederick, you may leave until I call for you," Mrs. Vonus said as Leonard and his guard left the stairway.

The golem turned to go back upstairs.

"See you later, eh, Freddy?" Leonard said, punching the golem in the shoulder. His arm felt as if the skin were being flayed off, but he only

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grinned and tried to keep his mind blank. He wanted the Housemother to think he didn't feel a thing.

Frederick, looking distraught, retreated.

John whistled admiringly. "How'd you do that? I tried to get Prince Albert in a half nelson once and thought I was gonna split open like Humpty Dumpty."

Leonard shrugged, barely keeping himself from wincing, and said, "Looks like you've lost some weight."

John's expression switched from admiration to unhappiness. "That'll happen when you're allowed to eat only every other day."

Leonard glared at Mrs. Vonus. "You starving this kid?"

The Housemother seemed perturbed. "He is overweight, so I have put him on a diet."

"Diet, schmyet," Leonard said. "He's dead, isn't he? You've got powers, don't you? Why don't you just hocus-pocus the excess baggage away?"

Mrs. Vonus sighed. "I've told you before: Here you must learn the things you did not learn in life. John was a glutton in life, so he must learn to avoid that sin before being allowed to —"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Leonard interrupted. "Before he goes skipping up the Hill like a good little angel, tra-la-la, whoop-te-do. Bullsh — Bull —Nonsense." The word was far too weak. "The truth is that you still want to punish him for the trouble he got into on his first day. You made up this 'diet' scam as an excuse to hurt him."

John's eyebrows shot up, and he spun to face Mrs. Vonus. "Is that true? I've been good except for the half nelson, haven't I? I paid for that mistake as soon as I made it, didn't I?"

The Housemother pursed her lips. "You mustn't listen to Leonard. I'm afraid he hasn't progressed beyond the point where he'll say anything to cause difficulty for me."

"Hey, John," Leonard said, "am I the one who gave you a two-legged electric eel for a playmate?"

John opened his mouth to answer, but Mrs. Vonus spoke before he had a chance.

"Enough of this," she said. "Leonard, you are dangerously close to losing dinner privileges for three days in a row. Kindly be quiet and come with me, both of you." She turned and waddled into the Front Parlor.

Leonard leaned close to John and whispered, "She's scared, man. Why

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else would she crack enough to let us get together again?"

John edged away and followed the Housemother.

Leonard hurried to catch up. "What's wrong? I got a disease or something?"

John paused at the entrance to the Parlor. "Nothing personal," he said softly. "It's just that I'm dying from lack of food, and I don't want to tick her off. You've been downstairs only two minutes, and you've already made me gripe at her."

Leonard felt dazed for a moment, then angry. "You're a coward."

"No," John said, "I'm hungry." He followed Mrs. Vonus into the Front Parlor.

Leonard stood in the entranceway, debating whether to finally try to escape.

"The front door won't let you out," Mrs. Vonus called. "And if you hesitate any longer, the floor of the foyer will become hot enough to burn the flesh off your feet."

Leonard went into the Front Parlor and saw that the furniture was arranged in a circle again.

This time the audience consisted of forty Orthodox rabbis wearing phylacteries, tallithim, and yarmulkes.

John and Mrs. Vonus waited in the center of the circle. The Housemother was holding two cordless microphones.

"You're slipping," Leonard said as he walked sideways between two chairs to enter the circle. "These guys aren't going to slap me into a pillory."

"Perhaps not," Mrs. Vonus said, handing him one of the microphones. "But can you make them laugh?"

Leonard considered that.

With the Puritans, he had known what to expect. But with this audience. . . . How could he predict how they would react to him? It would depend on where they were from, whom they knew, in which decade they had died. . . .

"Sure I can," he said, hoping that the Housemother wasn't reading his mind.

Mrs. Vonus turned toward John. "And you? Can you make these good men laugh?"

John looked nervous. "I, uh . . . what am I supposed to do?"

"Why, what you did in life," the Housemother said. "Be funny." She

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handed John the second microphone and went to sit beside one of the rabbis.

"You want to go first?" Leonard asked John.

John's face looked waxy. "I —" he began, whispering hoarsely, and swallowed. "I can't do stand-up. I'm a sketch player. Besides, I need some . . . some stuff."

Leonard nodded. "Sometimes I needed a little taste, too. But no matter what I did to get ready, I always needed to throw up before going onstage. Three good upchucks, and I was fine."

"I heard that about you," John said.

Leonard was taken aback. "You know who I am?"

John licked his lips. "I think so, but I can't remember your name. It's as if it's one of those words we can't say here."

Leonard grinned. "Sounds right." He looked around the room at the rabbis, most of whom were stroking their beards in an irritated fashion. "Tell you what. I'll start, and if you think of something, jump in."

John swallowed again, his Adam's apple jerking as if it were trying to escape his throat. "Don't count on me. I feel like barfing."

"There'd be something wrong with you if you didn't," Leonard said, and brought his microphone up to his lips.

18.

SHOLEM ALECHEIM, gentlemen," Leonard said, his voice booming from the walls, and waited for the rabbis' response.

They said nothing.

"What's this?" Leonard said in mock surprise. "Rabbis unwilling to wish a fellow Jew peace? Have you been hanging out with Baptists or what? Oh, not that I blame you — you probably don't consider me a proper Jew. I was foulmouthed, disrespectful, unobservant, and irreverent. Besides which, I had a tattoo and consorted with so many shiksas that you'd all drop dead if I told you the number — if you weren't already dead, that is."

"Shame," one of the rabbis said severely.

"This is funny?" said another.

"*Oy, Gottenyu*!" moaned a third.

Leonard turned to gesture at the portrait of Calvin Coolidge. John was standing to one side of the fireplace, looking pale and sick.

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"Now there," Leonard said, indicating Coolidge, "was a good Jewish boy for you. He was clean, reverent, chaste, temperate, and so polite that he often seemed to be in a coma. Not to mention that he grew up to be president. Why is it, rabbis, that all of the really good Jewish boys turn out to be goyim?"

As he asked the question, he brought his gaze down from the portrait and saw that John's eyes were wide with terror.

Leonard turned quickly and saw that all of the rabbis had become smooth-shaven Catholic priests.

They've been waiting for this chance ever since Chicago, ever since I started doing the Religions, Incorporated, bit, he thought. *Now they can keep me in a hostile courtroom until the universe disintegrates and each of them puts a spot of the ash on his forehead —*

He saw that Mrs. Vonus was smiling more broadly than she had at any time since he'd come to the Home.

— and Miss Self-Righteous Daisy Duck gave me to them.

"Are you going to tell us your confession or aren't you?" one of the priests asked sternly.

"Confession?" Leonard asked. "That's only for the faithful, isn't it? Do I look faithful? Let's try a test: 'Hail, Mary, full of grapes —' What the heck, you didn't wanna hear my confession anyhow, Pops, er, Father. It's pretty messy, particularly the part where I dress like a priest and con middle-aged women into giving me loads of cash for a South American leper colony, keeping half for myself. But hey, you can understand that. You put on a stiff white collar, and anybody who's carrying around the smallest shred of guilt — meaning everybody — feels compelled to give you money, all of it tax-free. It's almost worth giving up sex, and it's definitely worth *saying* you'll give up sex."

The priests' faces became more than grim.

"Heretic," one said, almost growling.

"He should be burned at the stake," another said, and turned toward the Housemother. "We can do that, can't we?"

Mrs. Vonus nodded. "Keep in mind, however, that he won't die."

"As long as he hurts," the priest said.

Leonard stared at the Housemother. "But — When the Puritans put me in the pillory, you said —"

"You've made no progress since then," she said. "More serious measures are in order."

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Every muscle in Leonard's body knotted with his outrage. "Hypocrite!" he screamed, and his voice shrieked from the walls with a sound like grinding metal. "You think you've fixed us so we can't say dirty words? Well, you forgot *hypocrite*. A hypocrite lies to the people she claims to be saving, and when she's caught in the lie, she says, 'That was then; this is now; you haven't been good enough.'"

Mrs. Vonus's smile disappeared. "You could have listened to me. You could have tried to understand why you have to change —"

"But NOOOOOOOOOOOOO," John cried, bounding up to stand beside Leonard. "You had to be an *individual*. You had to indulge your *self*."

Leonard couldn't tell whether John was being sarcastic or serious, but he chose to believe that the other comedian had found some courage.

"I know, I know," Leonard said melodramatically, closing his eyes and placing the back of his left wrist against his forehead. "How could I have been so unreasonable as to believe in the sanctity of anything so despicable as individual freedom?"

"REPENT!" fifty voices shouted.

Leonard opened his eyes and saw that the priests had been replaced by evangelical preachers in three-piece suits. They were all standing, waving heavy black Bibles and pointing at him.

"THE DAY OF JUDGMENT IS UPON YE!" they cried.

John touched Leonard's arm. "What's going on?" he whispered. He was still holding his microphone to his mouth, and the whisper hissed through the room like a gust of wind.

Leonard felt dizzy. He was afraid to see what the preachers would turn into next.

He lowered his microphone and spoke into John's ear. "She's pulling out all the stops," he said. "She wants to make an example of me."

"So why am I here?" John's whisper roared from the walls. "I've been good —"

"An example's useless without a 'beneficiary,'" Leonard said.

Mrs. Vonus, still seated, smiled up at the preacher standing next to her.

"Proceed," she said.

The preachers raised their Bibles higher and moved a step closer to Leonard and John.

"HE HATH APPOINTED A DAY, IN WHICH HE WILL JUDGE THE WORLD," the preachers roared.

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"Holy sh — sh — What are they doing?" John said tremulously, his voice vibrating from the walls.

"I'm not sure," Leonard said, trying to squelch his fear, "but I think we're about to be bludgeoned with the Good Book."

"DEPART FROM ME, YE CURSED," the mass preacher-voice bellowed, "INTO EVERLASTING FIRE, PREPARED FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS FALLEN ANGELS."

John dropped his microphone and fell to his knees. "They're going to burn us!" he shrieked, and covered his face with his hands.

Leonard felt heat on his neck. He looked behind him and saw flames leaping in the fireplace.

"Goddamn," he said. He wished he had time to enjoy having said it.

He turned to face the preachers again, hoping to find a gap in the cordon.

The preachers had become blue-uniformed police officers. The Bibles had become billy clubs.

"YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, SCUM," they chanted. "YOU CAN'T SAY THAT IN A PUBLIC PLACE."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," John was sobbing.

Leonard's teeth clenched. It was the cops or the fire.

He raised his microphone as if it were a blackjack.

"Come on!" he yelled. "This time I'm not gonna try to fight you with the Constitution! This time I'm giving back what I get, you bas — bas —"

"SCUM," the cops said.

John was crying hysterically.

The cops became judges in black robes; the billies became gavels.

"GUILTY," the judges said.

Leonard sucked in a breath that scorched his lungs.

"You *bastards!*" he shouted, and swung the microphone.

His head exploded in agony as the gavels rained down and transformed.

Now his attackers were lawyers; now priests; now cops; now Puritans; now nuns; now rabbis; now preachers; now SS troops; now judges.

After a while, Leonard didn't know whether he was being beaten with billy clubs, or Bibles, or whips, or rosaries, or briefcases, or gavels, or phylacteries. He didn't know whether the liquid on his tongue was sweat, saliva, blood, or wine.

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19.

IT LASTED until he hurt so much that he wished he could die again.

Then until he wished he had never died at all.

Then until he wished he had never been born.

Finally, when he had been beaten so long that he no longer knew what it was like not to be beaten, he wished he had never done anything against the Rules of the Home.

It stopped.

The priests, the judges, the rabbis, the cops . . . all were gone. Leonard's vision cleared, and he saw his hands pressed into the carpet, yellow and orange flickers dancing across the skin. The microphone lay a few inches beyond the fingers of his right hand. He smelled blood.

He stared at his hands and the microphone for a long time, trying to understand which was a part of him. He flexed his fingers, and the carpet fibers prickled his palms.

Gradually he began to hear a sound that was unlike the sound of clubs striking flesh. Someone was crying.

He knew it wasn't him. He had gone beyond crying centuries ago.

"You may stand," a brittle voice said.

Slowly, Leonard pushed himself up until he was resting on his knees alone.

A small, elderly woman stood before him.

"I —," he began, and then coughed because he was unaccustomed to using his voice. "I remember you."

The woman nodded. "I am Mrs. Vonus."

The crying had not stopped. Leonard turned his head and saw a chubby man crouching next to the mantel, hiding his face against wooden cherubim.

"John?" Leonard said tentatively.

John twitched and turned away from the mantel. His face was tear-streaked. "They didn't kill you?" he asked tremulously.

This struck Leonard as funny, although he wasn't sure why. "No, they couldn't do that."

John blinked and then wiped his nose on his necktie. "I guess not," he said, his voice half-muffled by the fabric.

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Mrs. Vonus walked toward John, extending her right hand. "Come along. The remainder of Leonard's lesson will be private."

A nugget of panic pulsed in Leonard's chest. "Are they coming back?"

Mrs. Vonus helped John to his feet, then smiled at Leonard. "Not unless you want them to. Someone else is here to see you, though."

Satan, he thought. *Satan has come to throw me into the lake of fire.*

"No," Mrs. Vonus said, tugging on John's arm. "Not unless you want him to."

Leonard crawled to a chair and used it as a brace to help himself stand. By the time he was fully upright, Mrs. Vonus and John were going through the wide doorway.

"Don't leave me alone," Leonard said.

"I won't," the Housemother answered.

John looked back. "Sorry I let you down," he said weakly.

Then they were gone. Leonard tried to follow, but his legs wouldn't carry his weight. He collapsed into the chair.

He found himself facing the fireplace, where a small fire was burning. Standing in front of it was a slender woman wearing a cream-colored evening gown. Her face was hidden in shadow.

"Melody?" he said hesitantly. It was the only woman's first name that he could remember.

The woman walked toward him. "Who's that?" she asked. "One of your girlfriends?"

Her voice was like music with a sharp edge.

"No," he said, not knowing whether he was lying. "I don't . . . have any girlfriends."

"Better not," the woman said.

She sat in a chair beside him. He could see her clearly now — her smooth, fair skin; her incredibly long red hair; her penetrating blue eyes. Her expression was a combination of disdain and pity.

Leonard felt as though someone had stuck a knife in his throat.

"How have you been?" he said hoarsely.

"You cut out on me," she said.

He tried to swallow. "I didn't mean to."

"There were a lot of things you didn't mean to do," she said. "You did them anyway. You hurt me. You hurt everybody."

Leonard felt a small stirring of anger. "You hurt me, too."

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"We didn't wallow in it. We weren't so obsessed with truth that we forgot about caring."

His anger drowned in a wave of remorse.

"I never forgot," he said, almost whispering.

"You did," she said. "You forgot about everything except your tapes and transcripts, your affidavits and judgments. We wanted you to stop. But you kept after it until you killed yourself. Until you left us."

Leonard reached for her. He wanted to caress her hand, her arm, her cheek.

She was sitting right next to him, but his fingers found nothing but air. She was so near that he could smell her perfumed skin and hair, and she was much too far away to touch.

"I didn't do it on purpose," he said desperately, stretching for her. "They did it. They killed me."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"The lawyers, the judges, the priests, the councilmen, the cops —"

The woman shook her head. "If only you had tried a little, they would have left you alone."

"I had a right —"

"Which you exercised at our expense." The woman stood. "I didn't expect you to change entirely, not when I wasn't able to myself. But it wouldn't have hurt you to try."

She turned her back on him and walked toward the fireplace.

Leonard wanted to go after her, but he couldn't even stand.

"Don't," he pleaded. "I need to be with you."

The woman paused before the hearth. "It will have to be on the Hill," she said. "You'll have to change. Otherwise this is good-bye."

She stooped and entered the fire, which flared and consumed her.

Leonard wanted to cry, but he still lacked the ability. Of all the things that had been taken from him, that was almost the worst.

Almost.

But he couldn't remember what else was missing. He couldn't remember ever having had anything to lose.

All he knew was that he was tired. He would do anything, anything at all, for just a little . . . peace.

He sat alone in the Parlor. The countenance of Calvin Coolidge half-smiled down on him, and Leonard imagined that it was conferring a blessing. A benediction.

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20.

IN THE days that followed, Leonard sometimes saw John in the theater, or at dinner, or sitting by the pond in the backyard. John always turned away as if afraid, but that was all right with Leonard. He knew that he and John weren't good for each other.

Everything else, though, was perfect. The season was always spring, and the trees and grass were always green. He accepted the Housemother's word as law, and he even began to understand the value of seeing *It's a Wonderful Life* over and over again.

He began to accumulate a long string of equal signs on the Progress Board.

He said hello to the women behind the candy counter every day, but while an impure thought occasionally crossed his mind, he no longer considered attempting a seduction. The price, he knew, would be too high to pay.

Strangely, the brunette, Melody, was getting lines around her eyes that made her look sad. Leonard couldn't imagine why, but he tried to be especially friendly toward her. It didn't seem to make any difference, so he decided to pray for her.

He ate his meals silently and reverently. He sang the Doxology at housemeetings. He polished the woodwork in the foyer and Front Parlor. He dusted the glass cases that lined the long hallway. He threw bread to the geese and breathed deeply of the warm air. He was polite and respectful to his fellow comedians and to Mrs. Vonus. Occasionally he was even allowed to escort the Housemother to dinner.

Once he saw a new arrival throw a roll at another resident, and he shuddered in revulsion. How could anyone be so ungrateful, wasteful, and rude?

Day followed day followed day, and at last the afternoon came when Leonard passed by the Progress Board on his way to the theater and saw a plus sign in his most recent box.

He stopped and stared at it, unable for a moment to comprehend what it meant.

"It's a pleasant feeling, isn't it, Leonard?" Mrs. Vonus asked.

She had appeared beside him out of nowhere, but he didn't flinch. He was used to it.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what to feel."

"You should feel fulfilled," Mrs. Vonus said, "but not proud. Pride is the downfall of mankind, you know."

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"Yes, ma'am," Leonard said.

The Housemother extended her right hand toward him and opened it. Instead of a balled-up handkerchief, a thick silver coin lay in her palm.

Leonard began to reach for it, then stopped himself. "I owe the Dessert Fund," he said. "I owe two dollars for every minus."

Mrs. Vonus smiled so broadly that Leonard saw for the first time that her teeth weren't all the same color. Some were a brilliant white, while others looked grayish.

"I may have neglected to tell you," the Housemother said, "that every plus received while paying off a debt to the Dessert Fund automatically becomes an equal sign." She nodded at the Progress Board. "All but the first few of your equal signs actually started out as pluses. Your debt is paid, and this dollar is yours to keep."

She took his right hand into her left, pressed the coin into his palm, and closed his fingers over it.

Leonard gazed at the arc of silver that extended beyond his fingertips, then looked again at the Progress Board. The box at the end of his row contained the numeral 1.

"I have a long way to go," he said.

Mrs. Vonus patted the hand holding the coin. "You'll be surprised at how quickly it will pass," she said. "Now that you've discovered the way to obedience and serenity, you'll be on the Hill in no time."

Leonard wondered if that could be true, then decided it must be. The Housemother had said so.

"You've learned well," Mrs. Vonus said, and waddled down the hall.

Before going on to the theater, Leonard looked at the total at the end of John's row and saw that his friend had two pluses. He briefly hoped he would see John at the movie so he could congratulate him, but then he decided he'd better ask the Housemother first to make sure that was proper.

At the candy counter he said hello to the blonde and bought a box of Milk Duds from Melody, who still looked sad.

"Be happy," he told her. "You have a wonderful job in a wonderful place." He smiled. "It's a wonderful life. Or should I say afterlife?"

For some reason she looked sadder than ever.

When he sat down in his usual seat and put a candy into his mouth, he found it so sweet that one was all he could eat. He was used to simpler fare — the beets, potatoes, beans, and bread that were the staples at dinner. It

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felt unnatural and sinful to eat chocolate and caramel.

He dropped the nearly full box into the lobby's trash can after the movie.

That evening he was served his first dessert — a slice of cherry pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. He couldn't eat it, but he didn't feel that he had lost anything.

The other residents at his table looked at him strangely.

The next day he received another silver dollar, and he asked Mrs. Vonus if he might give it to a less fortunate comedian. She told him that was a fine impulse, but that it would be impossible to act upon. If given to one who was undeserving, the coin would crumble into sand.

So Leonard began stacking his silver dollars on the floor of his room, building a shrine to the saint on the wall. He didn't know her name, but could see that she was a great and righteous woman.

Day after day he studied the rapturous look on her face. Eventually he decided that he knew just how she felt.

21.

THE LITTLE silver shrine was nothing more than two three-inch columns when Leonard stopped counting the coins and looking at the Progress Board. He was no longer so vain as to keep track of his status. Instead, he was content to spend his time praying for guidance.

The shrine consisted of ten five-inch columns arranged in a circle on the day that Mrs. Vonus appeared in his open doorway and asked him to escort her to the movie.

Leonard was surprised. In his memory the Housemother had never gone to see *It's a Wonderful Life*. But he didn't question her; he extended his right elbow, and she slipped her left hand into the crook.

They walked downstairs at the head of a large group of residents. Leonard saw John, but he didn't speak to him. It would be rude to talk to the others while serving as the Housemother's escort.

When they were halfway down the hall to the theater. Mrs. Vonus stopped before one of the glass cases, and everyone stopped with her.

She took her left hand away from Leonard's arm and unballed the handkerchief that was in her right. Inside the handkerchief was a small key, with which she unlocked the case.

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As Mrs. Vonus swung open the glass door, white light spilled out and blinded Leonard for a moment. When the Housemother closed the door again, though, he was able to see despite the green spots that swam in front of his eyes.

Mrs. Vonus held five gold medallions in her left hand, each on a loop of fine chain.

She turned to face the residents.

"Frederick, Theodore, Albert, John, and Leonard," she said. "Step forward."

Leonard didn't move, since he was already separated from the main group, but the others came up to stand with him. John stood immediately to his right.

"These will enable you to see the sign you must see," the Housemother said, "and to go where you must go."

She placed a medallion around each of their necks, beginning with Leonard. While she was giving the others their own medallions. Leonard took his between his right thumb and forefinger to examine it.

It was a gold coin with a hole near the edge for the chain. In the center of the coin was the face of a laughing clown. Leonard knew from the shape of the mouth that it was the same face that had been beaten smooth by the front door's knocker.

Forming an arc around the clown's face were block letters that said GOOD FOR ONE FREE RIDE.

"We'll continue now, Leonard," Mrs. Vonus said when she'd distributed the other four medallions.

He offered her his arm again, and they continued down the hall toward the theater.

22.

WHEN THEY reached the lobby, Mrs. Vonus told the medallion winners to wait while the other residents went into the theater ahead of them.

Leonard smiled at the women behind the candy counter. The blonde smiled back, but Melody turned her face away.

After the main group of comedians had disappeared beyond the double doors, Mrs. Vonus lined up the five special men and stood in front of them, clearly pleased.

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Leonard saw her teeth for the second time. They reminded him of piano keys.

A shadow seemed to flicker across the Housemother's face.

"Today you will be leaving us," she said. "I have every confidence that you will all do well on the Hill."

"Pardon me, ma'am," Leonard said. He hadn't known that he was going to speak, and the sound of his voice startled him. "Perhaps I shouldn't ask, but . . . what will happen to us on the Hill?"

The other medallion winners — except John, who kept his eyes averted — looked at him as if he were foolish to ask such a question.

Mrs. Vonus pursed her lips and then said, "Good things, Leonard. Prayer. Contemplation. Fasting. Worship. All the things you have learned to do here at the Calvin Coolidge Home."

Leonard nodded and lowered his eyes. "Thank you, Housemother. Forgive me for asking."

"That's quite all right," Mrs. Vonus said with an odd strain in her voice.

Leonard looked up again and saw that Melody was bent over beside the cash register, hiding her face in her hands. Her body was trembling as if she were crying.

Why should she cry? he wondered. *Perhaps because she's not going up the Hill, too?*

He noticed that the blonde was standing well away from Melody and had her nose wrinkled in an expression of contempt.

"I must say farewell," Mrs. Vonus said. "Enjoy the movie. Then go where you must, and be obedient and humble."

Leonard shifted his gaze from the candy counter to the Housemother, and he thought he saw another shadow crossing her face.

"Aren't you going to watch the movie with us, Housemother?" he asked.

Mrs. Vonus sighed, then said, "I've seen it."

"Oh," Leonard said. "I'm sorry, Housemother. It's just that when you asked me to escort you to the movie, I thought that perhaps someone else would start the projector, and —"

"I understand," Mrs. Vonus said, interrupting him. "Go on, now. Go to your destiny."

Leonard nodded. "Yes, Housemother," he said, and turned to enter the theater.

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As he pulled open the double doors, he thought he heard Melody sob. He didn't look back to see for certain.

But he wondered.

23.

SHOULD AULD ac-quain-tance be for-got, a-and ne-ver brought to miiiind! Should auld ac-quain-tance be for-got, a-and daays of Auld Lang Syne!"

As *It's a Wonderful Life* ended with the triumphant song of a houseful of friends, Leonard felt moisture on his lower left eyelid. He reached up to rub it away, but as his thumb touched it, more came to replace it.

Tears.

How long had it been since he had shed actual tears?

More important, why was he shedding them now, when he should be happier than he had ever been before?

Maybe they were tears of joy.

As the music and credits faded away, he tried to examine his emotions and found that he had no idea what he was feeling. He had been content for so long that he'd forgotten what any other state of being was like.

It must be joy. How could it be anything else, when I'm going up the Hill!

The screen went white, and then the house lights came up. The unmedallioned residents began leaving.

Leonard waited. Mrs. Vonus had said that he and the other medallion wearers would see a sign. . . .

It was a few yards from the lower right corner of the screen, and it had never been there before:

A glowing red sign that said EXIT.

The last unmedallioned resident went through the double doors, leaving the privileged five alone. Leonard stood and shuffled to the aisle.

He couldn't feel his legs as he walked down the aisle and across to the slitted velvet curtain that hung below the sign. He couldn't even feel his thoughts. He was an automaton, doing what he had to do.

The others were ahead of him. John was immediately in front of him, and Leonard wanted to touch his friend's shoulder to get his attention.

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When he had done that, he would ask John what he was feeling, and whether he had cried at the end of the movie.

But Leonard's arms were as heavy as bars of lead, and he couldn't lift them.

The first three comedians went through the slitted curtain quickly, as if unable to contain their eagerness to reach the top of the Hill.

John paused at the curtain and seemed about to turn around, but then he went through also.

Leonard took a last look at the theater and wondered if he would miss Jimmy Stewart.

Then he stepped forward and found himself in the backyard, which was the same as it had always been except for the tulip-lined gravel path along which he and the others walked. Looking ahead, he saw that the path led from the northeast corner of the Home to a golden door set into the wall at the northern boundary of the grounds.

Leonard knew then that the path, the multicolored tulips, and the door in the wall had been there all along, as had the EXIT sign and the curtained doorway in the theater. But without the GOOD FOR ONE FREE RIDE medallion, he had been blind to them.

Pretty tricky, he thought, and then wondered if that was impious.

No matter. He had the medallion. The decision had been made. He was going to the top of the Hill, and Glory.

As he walked behind the others, he looked up at the pure blue of the sky and breathed in the delicious scents of spring. It was wonderful to be outdoors after being cooped up in the movie theater.

He lowered his gaze slightly and squinted at the half-hidden golden buildings that were his destination. He hoped the worship, obedience, and-so-on-and-so-forth in which he would participate there wouldn't prevent him from getting out into the sunshine occasionally.

A distant noise brought him out of his reverie.

He paused, listening, and the noise grew louder.

It was the sound of the red International pickup's engine.

"Do you hear that?" he said to John's back, and turned around to look at the road.

The truck was just pulling up beside the again-visible footbridge. The driver's side faced the Home, and Leonard could see Ol' Pete's profile.

"Hello!" he cried, waving his arms. "Mr. Pete! I made it!"

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Ol' Pete didn't seem to hear or see him.

Leonard took a deep breath, planning to shout as loud as he could, but let it out silently when he felt a touch on his arm.

He looked over his shoulder. John was right behind him, a troubled look in his eyes.

"Come on," John said nervously. "The others will leave us behind."

Leonard saw that the first three comedians had reached the wall and opened the door. He glimpsed a gleaming staircase beyond.

"Go ahead," he told John. "I'll catch up. I can open the door as long as I'm wearing my medallion."

John shook his head. "You don't know that. The Housemother sent us out as a group. There's no telling what might happen if we split up."

Leonard turned back toward the International. "I just want to see if I recognize the new man. If he's someone I know, I want to tell him not to be afraid, that he can make it to the Hill if he tries —"

The pickup's passenger door slammed, and Leonard felt a tension in his abdomen he didn't understand.

A slim, mustached black man walked around the front end of the truck, talking loudly and punctuating his words by slapping the hood.

"— kind of deal is this, motha — motha —," the black man said, and then pounded on the hood with both fists. "That rips it! You can mess with my clothes, you can mess with my name —"

The black man shook his left arm, and Leonard saw the wristband flash.

"— you can even mess with my memory, but when you mess with my *mind* so that I can't even talk like me, then you've ticked me! I want an explanation, and I want it *now*."

Leonard found himself grinning at the thought that Mrs. Vonus was going to have a tough time with this one.

That's terrible. I ought to be ashamed of myself.

"— get across the ditch when I'm good and ready, and that ain't gonna be until I get answers. Say what? Well, I'd better, man. I got your license number —"

Leonard laughed, and was shocked at himself.

What's funny about this! That man has no idea of the rewards of obedience, of the blessing of contentment. . . .

The black man was halfway across the footbridge when Ol' Pete blared the International's horn.

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The newcomer didn't flinch. Instead, he turned around with his arms akimbo.

"You think that's cool? How cool you think it'd be if I come back and beat your head on the gearshift, huh?"

The International's engine revved, and the pickup vanished. A small spray of dust swirled down the road.

Leonard couldn't see the black man's face, but he knew the newcomer was staring at the empty air.

John grasped Leonard's right arm with both hands and pulled hard. "They're through!" he cried, panic charging his voice. "They're going up the Hill! We're going to be left behind if we don't go *now!*"

Leonard stumbled backward.

The Hill. That's my goal.

Why? What's there that's so important?

"A few more seconds," he said, bracing his feet. "I want to see what he does. . . ."

The black man turned around and, with incredible slowness, resumed crossing the footbridge.

"Motha —," the man said. "Motha —"

Come on, Leonard thought desperately, not knowing what it was that he was urging or why he wanted to. *Come on, come on, come on. . . .*

The black man had reached the end of the bridge and was about to step onto the brick wall that led to the Home's front door.

"Motha —," the man said, hesitating.

Leonard wrenched forward, tearing his arm from John's grasp.

"*COME ON!*" he screamed.

"He can't hear you," John said, beginning to sob. "He's not like us; he doesn't have the coin. . . ."

The stranger's right foot touched the brick walk.

"You've gotta come now," John said. "Please, please, you've gotta —"

"Motha*fuck*," the black man said.

Leonard felt himself teetering, as if standing on a wire over a canyon. He could actually see the wire and the empty air surrounding him.

The Hill. That's my goal. . . .

He looked down at the jagged, multihued rocks of the canyon.

They were a lot more interesting than the slick golden mountain where the wire was anchored.

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"Leonard" never did feel right. . . .

He stepped into space, into another name.

"Lenny!" John cried.

The black man started up the walk, and Lenny turned to face his friend.

"I'll help you if you stay," he said. "I promise."

John, almost crying, shook his head and looked down at the gravel. "No, I. . . . No. All I ever *wanted* was to be happy."

Lenny nodded slowly. "I hear you can get that up there. Happiness by the barrelful."

Without raising his eyes, John turned and walked toward the golden door.

Lenny watched until his friend stepped over the threshold. Then he turned and ran back down the tulip-lined path.

Yelling like Johnny Weissmuller, he burst through the red velvet curtains, charged up the aisle, and straight-armed the double doors. They swung open with a *whooshing* sound, and Lenny leapt into the lobby, landing in front of the candy counter.

Melody and the blonde woman gaped at him. The blonde's mouth opened and closed repeatedly.

Lenny yanked the medallion off his neck, breaking the chain, and held it across the counter toward Melody.

"You can tie a knot in the chain," he said.

Melody held out her left hand, and Lenny dropped the medallion into it. Then he closed her fingers over it and held on for a moment.

"What you do is your business," he said, looking into her eyes, which were a much darker brown than he'd ever realized before. "Personally, though, I hope you stick around. I still wanna take you on a picnic."

He saw the beginnings of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

Then he was running again, out of the lobby and down the long hallway.

As he shot by the Progress Board, he yanked the felt-tipped marker from its string. A blue knife of pain stabbed up his arm, but he didn't fall.

Aching, elated, he dashed to the foyer.

Mrs. Vonus was there, facing the front door.

"Hey, Daisy Duck!" Lenny yelled, sprinting into the Front Parlor. "Glad the new guy's not in yet — I've got something to show you!"

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He bounded over a divan, then grabbed a chair and dropped it in front of the fireplace.

Looking back into the foyer, he saw Mrs. Vonus staring at him, her slack mouth giving her face a most un-Housemotherlike expression.

"Ah, you're confused, madame," Lenny said grandly. "Allow me to explain: Happiness and contentment are fine things for some, but for me they're just *boring*. So bring on the Puritans, because I've thought of a Thanksgiving bit that'll knock 'em on their asses."

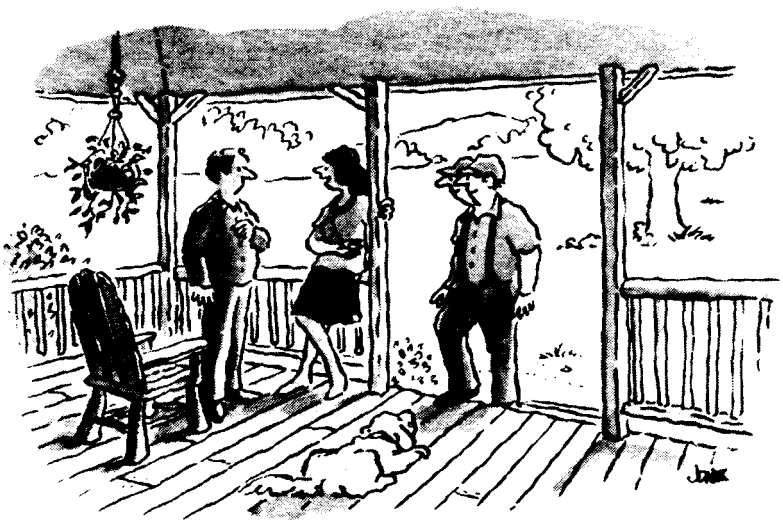
He jumped onto the chair, uncapped the marker, and carefully drew an elegant mustache on Calvin Coolidge.

Thunder shook the blue-paisley walls.

The comedian glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

"Pardon me, Housemother," he said, "but don't you think you should answer the door?"

To the memory of Leonard Alfred Schneider.



"Glenn, I don't believe you met my cousin, Billy Bob."

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One of SF's most inventive young writers offers an amusing report on biotechnology's worst disaster . . .

Our Neural Chernobyl

By Bruce Sterling

THE LATE TWENTIETH century, and the early years of our own millennium, form, in retrospect, a single era. This was the Age of the Normal Accident, in which people cheerfully accepted technological risks that today would seem quite insane.

Chernobyls were astonishingly frequent during this footloose, not to say criminally negligent, period. The nineties, with their rapid spread of powerful industrial technologies to the developing world, were a decade of frightening enormities, including the Djakarta supertanker spill, the Lahore meltdown, and the gradual but devastating mass poisonings from tainted Kenyan contraceptives.

Yet none of these prepared humankind for the astonishing global effects of biotechnology's worst disaster: the event that has come to be known as the "neural chernobyl."

We should be grateful, then, that such an authority as the Nobel prize-winning systems neurochemist Dr. Felix Hotton should have turned his

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able pen to the history of *Our Neural Chernobyl* (Bessemer, December 2056, $499.95). Dr. Hotton is uniquely qualified to give us this devastating reassessment of the past's wrongheaded practices. For Dr. Hotton is a shining examplar of the new "Open-Tower Science," that social movement within the scientific community that arose in response to the New Luddism of the teens and twenties.

Such pioneering Hotton papers as "The Locus Coeruleus Efferent Network: What in Heck Is It There For?" and "My Grand Fun Tracing Neural Connections with Tetramethylbenzidine" established this new, relaxed, and triumphantly subjective school of scientific exploration.

Today's scientist is a far cry from the white-coated sociopath of the past. Scientists today are democratized, media-conscious, fully integrated into the mainstream of modern culture. Today's young people, who admire scientists with a devotion once reserved for pop stars, can scarcely imagine the situation otherwise.

But in chapter 1, "The Social Roots of Gene-Hacking," Dr. Hotton brings turn-of-the-century attitudes into startling relief. This was the golden age of applied biotech. Anxious attitudes toward "genetic tampering" changed rapidly when the terrifying AIDS pandemic was finally broken by recombinant DNA research.

It was during this period that the world first became aware that the AIDS retrovirus was a fantastic blessing in a particularly hideous disguise. This disease, which dug itself with horrible, virulent cunning into the very genetic structure of its victims, proved a medical marvel when finally broken to harness. The AIDS virus's RNA transcriptase system proved an able workhorse, successfully carrying healing segments of recombinant DNA into sufferers from myriad genetic defects. Suddenly one ailment after another fell to the miracle of RNA tanscriptase techniques: sickle-cell anemia, cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs disease — literally hundreds of syndromes now only an unpleasant memory.

As billions poured into the biotech industry, and the instruments of research were simplified and streamlined, an unexpected dynamic emerged: the rise of "gene-hacking." As Dr. Hotton points out, the situation had a perfect parallel in the 1970s and 1980s in the subculture of computer hacking. Here again was an enormously powerful technology suddenly within the reach of the individual.

As biotech startup companies multiplied, becoming ever smaller and

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more advanced, a hacker subculture rose around this "hot technology" like a cloud of steam. These ingenious, anomic individuals, often led into a state of manic self-absorption by their ability to dice with genetic destiny, felt no loyalty to social interests higher than their own curiosity. As early as the 1980s, devices such as high-performance liquid chromotographs, cell-culture systems, and DNA sequencers were small enough to fit into a closet or attic. If not bought from junkyards, diverted, or stolen outright, they could be reconstructed from off-the-shelf parts by any bright and determined teenager.

Dr. Hotton's second chapter explores the background of one such individual: Andrew ("Bugs") Berenbaum, now generally accepted as the perpetrator of the neural chernobyl.

Bugs Berenbaum, as Dr. Hotton convincingly shows, was not much different from a small horde of similar bright young misfits surrounding the genetic establishments of North Carolina's Research Triangle. His father was a semisuccessful free-lance programmer, his mother a heavy marijuana user whose life centered around her role as "Lady Anne of Greengables" in Raleigh's Society for Creative Anachronism.

Both parents maintained a flimsy pretense of intellectual superiority, impressing upon Andrew the belief that the family's sufferings derived from the general stupidity and limited imagination of the average citizen. And Berenbaum, who showed an early interest in such subjects as math and engineering (then considered markedly unglamorous), did suffer some persecution from peers and schoolmates. At fifteen he had already drifted into the gene-hacker subculture, accessing gossip and learning "the scene" through computer bulletin boards and all-night beer-and-pizza sessions with other would-be pros.

At twenty-one, Berenbaum was working a summer internship with the small Raleigh firm of CoCoGenCo, a producer of specialized biochemicals. CoCoGenCo, as later congressional investigations proved, was actually a front for the California "designer drug" manufacturer and smuggler Jimmy ("Screech") McCarley. McCarley's agents within CoCoGenCo ran innumerable late-night "research projects" in conditions of heavy secrecy. In reality, these "secret projects" were straight production runs of synthetic cocaine, beta-phenethylamine, and sundry tailored variants of endorphin, a natural antipain chemical ten thousand times more potent than morphine.

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One of McCarley's "black hackers," possibly Berenbaum himself, conceived the sinister notion of "implanted dope factories." By attaching the drug-producing genetics directly into the human genome, it was argued, abusers could be "wet-wired" into permanent states of intoxication. The agent of fixation would be the AIDS retrovirus, whose RNA sequence was a matter of common knowledge and available on dozens of open scientific databases. The one drawback to the scheme was, of course, that the abuser would "burn out like a shitpaper moth in a klieg light," to use Dr. Hotton's memorable phrase.

Chapter 3 is rather technical. Given Dr. Hotton's light and popular style, it makes splendid reading. Dr. Hotton attempts to reconstruct Berenbaum's crude attempts to rectify the situation through gross manipulation of the AIDS RNA transcriptase. What Berenbaum sought, of course, was a way to shut off and start up the transcriptase carrier, so that the internal drug factory could be activated at will. Berenbaum's custom transcriptase was designed to react to a simple user-induced trigger — probably D, 1, 2, 5-phospholytic gluteinase, a fractionated component of "Dr. Brown's Celery Soda," as Hotton suggests. This harmless beverage was a favorite quaff of gene-hacker circles.

Finding the coca-production genomes too complex, Berenbaum [or perhaps a close associate, one Richard ["Sticky"] Ravetch] switched to a simpler payload: the just-discovered genome for mammalian dendritic growth factor. Dendrites are the treelike branches of brain cells, familiar to every modern schoolchild, which provide the mammalian brain with its staggering webbed complexity. It was theorized at the time that DG factor might be the key to vastly higher states of human intelligence. It is to be presumed that Berenbaum and Ravetch had both dosed themselves with it. As many modern victims of the neural chernobyl can testify, it does have an effect. Not precisely the one that the CoCoGenCo zealots envisioned, however.

While under the temporary maddening elation of dendritic "branch-effect," Berenbaum made his unfortunate breakthrough. He succeeded in providing his model RNA transcriptase with a trigger, but a trigger that made the transcriptase itself far more virulent than the original AIDS virus itself. The stage was set for disaster.

It is at this point that one must remember the social attitudes that bred the soul-threatening isolation of the contemporary scientific worker.

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Dr. Hotton is quite pitiless in his psychoanalysis of the mental mind-set of his predecessors. The supposedly "objective worldview" of the sciences is now quite properly seen as a form of mental brainwashing, deliberately stripping its victims of the full spectrum of human emotion and response. Under such conditions, Berenbaum's reckless act becomes almost pitiable; it was a convulsive overcompensation for years of emotional starvation. Without consulting his superiors, who might have shown more discretion, Berenbaum began offering free samples of his new wetwares to anyone willing to shoot them up.

There was a sudden brief plague of eccentric genius in Raleigh, before the now-well-known symptoms of "dendritic crash" took over, and plunged the experimenters into vision-riddled, poetic insanity. Berenbaum himself committed suicide well before the full effects were known. And the full effects, of course, were to go far beyond even this lamentable human tragedy.

Chapter 4 becomes an enthralling detective story as the evidence slowly mounts.

Even today the term "Raleigh collie" has a special ring for dog fanciers, many of whom have forgotten its original derivation. These likable, companionable, and disquietingly intelligent pets were soon transported all over the nation by eager buyers and breeders. Once it had made the jump from human host to canine, Berenbaum's transcriptase derivative, like the AIDS virus itself, was passed on through the canine maternal womb. It was also transmitted through canine sexual intercourse and, via saliva, through biting and licking.

No dendritically enriched "Raleigh collie" would think of biting a human being. On the contrary, these loyal and well-behaved pets have even been known to right spilled garbage cans and replace their trash. Neural chernobyl infections remain rare in humans. But they spread through North America's canine population like wildfire, as Dr. Hotton shows in a series of cleverly designed maps and charts.

Chapter 5 offers us the benefit of hindsight. We are now accustomed to the idea of many different modes of "intelligence." There are, for instance, the various types of computer Artificial Intelligence, which bear no real relation to human "thinking." This was not unexpected — but the diverse forms of animal intelligence can still astonish in their variety.

The variance between *Canis familiaris* and his wild cousin, the coyote,

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remains unexplained. Dr. Hotton makes a good effort, basing his explication on the coyote neural mapping of his colleague, Dr. Reyna Sanchez of Los Alamos National Laboratory. It does seem likely that the coyote's more fully reticulated basal commissure plays a role. At any rate, it is now clear that a startling advanced form of social organization has taken root among the nation's feral coyote population, with the use of elaborate coded barks, "scent-dumps," and specialized roles in hunting and food storage. Many of the nation's ranchers have now taken to the "protection system," in which coyote packs are "bought off" with slaughtered, barbecued livestock and sacks of dog treats. Persistent reports in Montana, Idaho, and Saskatchewan insist that coyotes have been spotted wearing cast-off clothing during the worst cold of winter.

It is possible that the common household cat was infected even earlier than the dog. Yet the effects of heightened cat intelligence are subtle and difficult to specify. Notoriously reluctant lab subjects, cats in their infected states are even sulkier about running mazes, solving trick boxes, and so on, preferring to wait out their interlocutors with inscrutable feline patience.

It has been suggested that some domestic cats show a heightened interest in television programs. Dr. Hotton casts a skeptical light on this, pointing out (rightly, as this reviewer thinks) that cats spend most of their waking hours sitting and staring into space. Staring at the flickering of a television is not much more remarkable than the hearthside cat's fondness for the flickering fire. It certainly does not imply "understanding" of a program's content. There are, however, many cases where cats have learned to paw-push the buttons of remote-control units. Those who keep cats as mousers have claimed that some cats now torture birds and rodents for longer periods, with greater ingenuity, and in some cases with improvised tools.

There remains, however, the previously unsuspected connection between advanced dendritic branching and manual dexterity, which Dr. Hotton tackles in his sixth chapter. This concept has caused a revolution in paleoanthropology. We are now forced into the uncomfortable realization that *Pithecanthropus robustus*, formerly dismissed as a large-jawed, vegetable-chewing ape, was probably far more intelligent than *Homo sapiens*. CAT scans of the recently discovered Tanzanian fossil skeleton, nicknamed "Leonardo," reveal a *Pithecanthropus* skull-ridge obviously

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rich with dendritic branching. It has been suggested that the pithecanthropoids suffered from a heightened "life of the mind" similar to the life-threatening, absentminded genius of terminal neural chernobyl sufferers. This yields the uncomfortable theory that nature, through evolution, has imposed a "primate stupidity barrier" that allows humans, unlike *Pithecanthropus*, to get on successfully with the dumb animal business of living and reproducing.

But the synergetic effects of dendritic branching and manual dexterity are clear in a certain nonprimate species. I refer, of course, to the well-known "chernobyl jump" of *Procyon lotor*, the American raccoon. The astonishing advances of the raccoon, and its Chinese cousin the panda, occupy the entirety of chapter 8.

Here Dr. Hotton takes the so-called "modern view," from which I must dissociate myself. I, for one, find it intolerable that large sections of the American wilderness should be made into "no-go areas" by the vandalistic activities of our so-called "striped-tailed cousins." Admittedly, excesses may have been committed in early attempts to exterminate the verminous, booming population of these masked bandits. But the damage to agriculture has been severe, and the history of kamikaze attacks by self-infected rabid raccoons is a terrifying one.

Dr. Hotton holds that we must now "share the planet with a fellow civilized species." He bolsters his argument with hearsay evidence of "raccoon culture" that to me seems rather flimsy. The woven strips of bark known as "raccoon wampum" are impressive examples of animal dexterity, but to my mind it remains to be proven that they are actually "money." And their so-called "pictographs" seem little more than random daubings. The fact remains that the raccoon population continues to rise exponentially, with raccoon bitches whelping massive litters every spring. Dr. Hotton, in a footnote, suggests that we can relieve crowding pressure by increasing the human presence in space. This seems a farfetched and unsatisfactory scheme.

The last chapter is speculative in tone. The prospect of intelligent rats is grossly repugnant; so far, thank God, the tough immune system of the rat, inured to bacteria and filth, has rejected retroviral invasion. Indeed, the feral cat population seems to be driving these vermin toward extinction. Nor have opossums succumbed; indeed, marsupials of all kinds seem immune, making Australia a haven of a now-lost natural world.

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Whales and dolphins are endangered species; they seem unlikely to make a comeback even with the (as-yet-unknown) cetacean effects of chernobyling. And monkeys, which might pose a very considerable threat, are restricted to the few remaining patches of tropical forest and, like humans, seem resistant to the disease.

Our neural chernobyl has bred a folklore all its own. Modern urban folklore speaks of "ascended masters," a group of chernobyl victims able to survive the virus. Supposedly, they "pass for human," forming a hidden counterculture among the normals, or "sheep." This is a throwback to the dark tradition of Luddism, and the popular fears once projected onto the dangerous and reckless "priesthood of science" are now transferred to these fairy tales of supermen. This psychological transference becomes clear when one hears that these "ascended masters" specialize in advanced scientific research of a kind now frowned upon. The notion that some fraction of the population has achieved physical immortality, and hidden it from the rest of us, is utterly absurd.

Dr. Hotton, quite rightly, treats this paranoid myth with the contempt it deserves.

Despite my occasional reservations, this is a splendid book, likely to be the definitive work on this central phenomenon of modern times. Dr. Hotton may well hope to add another Pulitzer to his list of honors. At ninety-five, this grand old man of modern science has produced yet another stellar work in his rapidly increasing oeuvre. His many readers, like myself, can only marvel at his vigor and clamor for more.

for Greg Bear

ABOUT THE COVER

Saturn seen from an Iceteroid by David A. Hardy (from the private collection of Mrs. Bernie Evans). Because this ice asteroid, or more probably cometary nucleus, is well above the ring-plane (unlike the satellites), we see the rings almost wide open - but in shadow, because the Sun is shining through them, revealing their intricate structure. This portion of the nucleus is almost pure ice, having been melted and then solidified during its last close-approach to the Sun.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

IS ANYONE LISTENING?

EVERYONE WHO has reached my level of late youth and has spent his time watching people and listening to them is bound to have become cynical. I, too, have become cynical. I have difficulty accepting things according to surface appearances and have trouble believing promises and assurances.

And even so I get stuck on occasion.

It seems that a small plot of land on Manhattan's upper west side was going to waste. It was just a ravished lot. Some public-spirited citizens of the neighborhood managed to have it set aside for public use. A garden was planted, benches were introduced, and I received a phone call from a woman who asked me, as a prominent resident on the southern fringe of the upper west side, to come down and preside over the ground-breaking ceremony.

I said, "I'd love to, but the date you suggest is a Tuesday, and every Tuesday I make my rounds of my publishers and then preside over a weekly luncheon of an organization of which I am president."

A few days later she phoned a second time and said the date had been changed to Thursday, at 10 A.M. I apologized again, for I was slated to do a phone interview on that day from 10 to 11 A.M.

Then came a third phone call. The time had been changed to 11:30 A.M., and I said, "Good! I'll be there."

After that I received several letters, a pamphlet of detailed information on the garden, and, on Thursday morning, there came a final phone call to make sure that I was in good health and hadn't forgotten. I said, "Fear not. I will be there by 11:30. In fact, I plan to be there a bit earlier so that you won't have cause to worry."

"That will be wonderful," she said.

As soon as my phone interview was over, therefore, I collected my

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dear wife, Janet, and we taxied to the garden. We were there at 11:20 A.M., ten minutes early as I had promised, and, to my surprise, the festivities were over and done with, and everyone was departing.

I asked for the woman who had phoned me. She was pointed out to me. I approached her and said, "I'm Isaac Asimov and I'm here early," and showed her my watch.

She stared at it and at me for a moment as though trying to place me, and then she called out, "Isaac Asimov has just arrived. Come back." (As though I were late and they had given up on me.)

Some people came back, rather reluctantly. I was asked to say a few words. I spoke for about ten seconds and that seemed to be enough. The group left even faster, clearly annoyed at having been delayed.

Janet asked, "What was all the fuss about getting you here?"

"I don't know," I explained, and we walked to a favorite restaurant that happened to be not too far away and buried our sorrows in a good lunch.

Another and greater justification for cynicism is that people don't listen, even when warnings are explicit, and even when the outlook is threatening.

On October 27, 1987, the *New York Times*, in its weekly science section, ran a rather long item under the headline: "Indispensable Helium is Routinely Squandered."

The article pointed out that three-fourths of the helium produced in the United States (which has more than 90 percent of the world's supply) is allowed to escape into the atmosphere, from which it is all but impossible to retrieve it. From the atmosphere, it leaks into outer space, from which it is quite impossible to retrieve it. Yet helium is vitally important and, for some purposes such as the continuing investigation of extremely low temperatures, it is indeed absolutely indispensable. There is and can be no substitute.

Do you suppose that people are now going to rise up and demand that helium be conserved?

Nonsense! This is not a new story. The *New York Times* may have just discovered this fact, but I once published an essay that mentioned the wastage of helium and strongly warned of the consequences and of the necessity of conservation. It was in an essay entitled *"The Element of Perfection"* and it appeared in the November 1960 issue of *F & SF*, a mere twenty-eight years ago!

Was anyone listening? Did anyone care? — Very few.

I devoted at least two essays in

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this magazine to warning of Earth's growing population. In the May 1969 issue, for instance, there was my essay, *"The Power of Progression."*

At that time, Earth's population was 3,500,000,000 as compared with about 2,000,000,000 at the time of my birth nearly half a century earlier. In that half-century, it had increased by 75 percent.

In the May 1980 issue of *F & SF*, I published *"More Crowded!"* At that time, the Earth's population was 4,200,000,000, so that in eleven years the number of human beings had increased by 700,000,000, which is very nearly the present population of India. In eleven years, in other words, we had added another India to the world, from the standpoint of numbers at least.

In *"More Crowded!,"* I made the following statement: "It is quite likely that we will end the decade of the 1980's with a world population edging toward 5,000,000,000."

As usual, I was conservative. We are not edging toward the five billion mark, we have passed it. And we have done this, not by the end of the 1980's, but by the time the decade was only three-fourths done. The earth passed the five billion mark some time late in 1986 or early in 1987. (We can't possibly know the exact date of this accomplishment because so much of the world is so poorly censused.)

In the seven years after *"More Crowded!"*, then, the Earth added 800,000,000 people, a hundred million more than it had added in the previous eleven years. In the eighteen years between 1969 and 1987, the Earth's population grew by 1,500,000,000 people (as much as it had gained in the previous *fifty* years), and that is equal to the population of *two* present day Indias. What's more, since the birth rate in the poor and industrially undeveloped nations is far higher than in the long industrialized ones, about 90 percent of the new mouths are born in the poor nations. We have therefore added two Indias not only in terms of numbers, but in terms of poverty as well.

And this has taken place despite the fact that the rate of increase has dropped from 2 percent a year in 1970 to 1.6 percent a year now, thanks chiefly to stern measures taken in China to reduce the birthrate.

Are we entitled to be relieved at the drop in birthrate? No, for the increase in population more than compensates for that. An increase of 2 percent a year in 1969, when the population was 3.5 billion, meant an increase of 70,000,000 that year. An increase of 1.6 percent a year in 1987, when the population was 5 billion, meant an increase of

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80,000,000 that year. So we're worse off now both in total numbers and in numbers of increase.

Let's take a closer look. An increase of 80,000,000 people in one year means an additional Mexico in a year. That is equivalent to 220,000 new people every day, or one new Lima, Ohio, every time you wake up in the morning. It is also equivalent to 150 additional people every minute or 5 additional people every two seconds. If we had a digital recording on which the Earth's population could be read off at each instant, the units figure would be flipping up new digits at more than twice the rate that the seconds figure would change on a digital watch.

Is anyone listening? Does anyone care?

In *"The Power of Progression,"* I began with a world population of 3.5 billion, and a doubling rate of once every 47 years, and worked out an equation that would give me the world population at any time in the future, provided the doubling rate stayed constant.

I showed that by 2554 A.D., the world population would be 20,000 billion, so that the average population density over the entire surface of the Earth, land and sea, would be equal to the average density, today, of Manhattan at noon.

I then assumed that every star in the Universe had ten habitable planets and that we could transfer people from planet to planet at will and instantaneously. By 6170 A.D. every planet in the Universe would be filled to Manhattan density.

I then imagined that all the mass in the Universe could be converted into human flesh and blood, and it turned out that if this could be done without limitation, then by 8700 A.D., the entire Universe would be nothing but a mass of humanity.

Since the birth rate has dropped since 1969, we can calculate the doubling rate right now at once every 50 years. This gives us a little more time. It won't be till 2585 A.D. that we achieve Manhattan density over all of Earth's surface and not till 9050 A.D. that we convert the entire Universe into nothing but humanity.

Obviously, this is far from enough. There's no question of converting the entire Universe into nothing but human flesh and blood by 8700 A.D., and giving us another 350 years to do it in is not going to help one iota. For that matter, we can't possibly live on an Earth that is all at Manhattan density by 2554, and giving us forty years extra won't help, either.

We *can't* continue multiplying at this rate for very long, no matter

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what we do. It won't help us to advance technology by any conceivable amount. For instance, it won't help us to go out into space at any conceivable rate. After all, since we're going to have 80 million people more in a year, when will we be able to put that many people in space in one year so as to stabilize the population? Do you want to be optimistic and say we can do that fifty years from now? Well, by then we'll be gaining 160,000,000 new mouths on Earth every year, and the people in space will be multiplying, too.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we will maintain this population increase indefinitely, because we *won't*. We won't for the best and most insuperable reason in the world. We won't because we *can't*. The only question about population that we can ask is *how* we will stop the population increase.

And the answer to that is that either: a) the birth rate will continue to decrease, or b) the death rate will increase, or c) both will take place. There are no other alternatives. I've said that before and I'm now saying it again.

Is anyone listening? Does anyone care?

The feeling on the part of demographers is that by the year 2000 the population will begin to level off and that by 2100 it will reach stability, though by that time the population will have reached some 10,000,000,000, or twice what it is now.

Is that a big sigh of releif I hear?

Then think! What kind of a world will it be by the time population stability is achieved?

The population of the Earth is not going up evenly. I said earlier that 90 percent of the population increase is in the underdeveloped nations. What's more, within those nations, the rural areas, as population multiplies, are ground ever deeper into poverty. With land less and less available, the peasantry drifts into the cities in search of jobs, so that the cities of the underdeveloped nations are growing at a cancerous rate.

In *"More Crowded!"* I expressed my surprise that the second largest city in the world was Mexico City. Between 1967 and 1979, its population had gone from 3,193,000 to 8,628,074. In merely twelve years it had increased its population nearly three-fold, going from the size of Chicago to more than the size of New York.

The latest figures I could find on its population is now 13,000,000, and that is probably low. I have heard larger figures given. In any case, it is now the most populous

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city in the world.

Before World War II, London was the largest city in the world with a population of 8,000,000 and New York City was second with 7,000,000. New York has kept its population at that height (with its suburbs growing rapidly, of course) and London has actually shrunk.

New York is now, according to the latest statistics I can find, only the 14th largest city in the world and London is the 16th. Here are the figures, which I imagine err on the low side:

Mexico City, Mexico	13,000,000
Sao Paulo, Brazil	12,600,000
Shanghai, China	12,000,000
Cairo, Egypt	12,000,000
Seoul, South Korea	9,600,000
Peking, China	9,300,000
Calcutta, India	9,200,000
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	9,000,000
Tokyo, Japan	8,500,000
Bombay, India	8,300,000
Moscow, U.S.S.R.	8,000,000
Tientsin, China	7,900,000
Jakarta, Indonesia	7,700,000
New York, U.S.A.	7,200,000
Canton, China	6,800,000
London, U.K.	6,700,000

Of the thirteen largest cities in the world, 1 is in Africa, 3 are in Latin America, and 8 are in Asia. Only 1 is in Europe and that is Moscow.

None of this alters the fact that the *richest* very large city remains New York, and this is significant. Size does not necessarily mean wealth. In fact, the very large cities in the non-industrial countries tend to contain square mile upon square mile of hovels, shacks, and shanties deprived of any of the amenities that an average dweller in a large city in an industrialized nation takes for granted.

And this will only get worse. Fast though the world's population is growing as a whole, and still faster though the world's underdeveloped population is growing, the fastest growth rate is in the cities of the underdeveloped nations. By 2000, even though the population will begin to be moving into its stabilizing period, the cities of the underdeveloped nations may still be expanding and may have collapsed into rotting nightmares.

Consider, too, that the terrible need for agricultural land forced by the population increase, together with the need for firewood (which is the most important fuel in many underdeveloped areas) is already resulting in the slaughter of the forests, particularly the rain forests, which are being hacked down at a fearful rate. Almost 15 million acres of forest are being cleared each year, and, by the year 2000, half the present forests of Earth may be gone.

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Remember that forests aren't just pretty trees taking up land that might better be used by human beings. Forests have root systems that conserve the soil and prevent the violent run-off of excess water. The trees give off water into the air, instead, cooling and moistening it in this way. Forests also produce oxygen at a rate higher than will any form of vegetation replacing them.

The soil in which rain forests grow is not very good and will be soon leached of nutrients by crops planted in them, while rain run-off will gully and destroy the soil altogether. Far from supplying us with agricultural land, the vanishing rain forests will yield to deserts.

The deserts are indeed expanding as a result of forest destruction, over-farming, and general human mishandling, and, by the year 2000, the area of new desert will be perhaps 1 1/2 times the area of the United States. And the fact that there will be less and less good land to cultivate will send more and more people into the overcrowded, festering, fetid cities.

The forests, too, are the habitat of myriad species of plants and animals, a couple of million of which (mostly insects, to be sure) have not yet even been classified. The destruction of the forests destroys habitats, and about a fifth of the animal and plant species now living will be extinct by the year 2000.

This is not something to be dismissed lightly. Such extinctions will upset the ecological balance and wreak havoc far beyond the actual extinctions themselves. There is also the question of what compounds of important medicinal and industrial value might exist in the plants and animals we have not yet investigated, and which will vanish forever together with whatever good they might have done us.

Then, too, the more people there are, the greater the rate at which we must consume the Earth's finite resources. Worse yet is the fact that the more people there are, the greater the rate at which we must produce waste products, many of them toxic.

Usable fresh water supplies will decrease, since larger and larger portions of them will be polluted to the point where they will be undrinkable without expensive treatment that many regions will not be able to afford. Nor will life be able to thrive in polluted water. Acid rain will grow worse and kill more lakes and more fish.

Even the ocean rim, which is the richest portion of the sea, is being increasingly polluted (and remember that microscopic forms of plant life in the uppermost layers of the ocean produce 80 percent of

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the oxygen that we cannot do without).

The atmosphere, too, is being increasingly polluted, and cities are becoming more and more smog-bound.

Even carbon dioxide, which is itself a rather benign and relatively non-toxic substance, is a deadly danger. The fuels we burn for energy at an ever increasing rate are producing carbon dioxide at a rate greater than the Earth's vegetation can utilize it and the Earth's ocean dissolve it. The result is that the percentage of carbon dioxide in the air (quite low — only 0.035 percent) is slowly, but steadily, increasing from year to year.

By 2000 A.D., the carbon dioxide content of the air may have increased by 1/3 as compared with today's content. This won't interfere with our breathing noticeably, but it will conserve more of the heat the Earth receives from the Sun so that Earth's average temperature will go up somewhat. This will change the weather pattern, probably for the worse, and increase the rate at which the polar ice-caps melt, raising the sea-level noticeably and allowing coastal areas to suffer more from high tides and storms.

Other forms of pollution are just as slowly and just as surely destroying the ozone layer in Earth's upper atmosphere. This will increase the intensity of ultraviolet light from the Sun at Earth's surface. Usually, the warning here is that skin cancers will increase, and so they will, but there may be worse. We don't know what the additional ultraviolet will do to the microscopic forms of life living in the soil and in the uppermost layers of the ocean. If these are badly damaged, the very viability of the Earth as a planet may be decreased markedly.

To be sure, Earth's resources may be made more efficient use of and wastes may be more rationally disposed of, if we make the social and technological effort, but there is a limit to what can be done if we continue to pour tens of millions of new human beings onto Earth's surface each year.

And as the population increases, as people crowd together more closely, as people find they can only get a smaller and smaller part of a pie that does not increase as the numbers do (but decreases in many ways), there will be increasing alienation, increasing refuge in drugs, increasing crime, increasing chance of war. In short, the world will become an ever more violent place.

Every one of these changes, which comes about more or less directly because of the ever increasing population, will serve to raise

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the death rate. There will be increasing starvation, and bodies weakened by undernourishment will be more prone to disease. There will be more deaths by violence. In short, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Famine, Pestilence, War, and Death) will ride the Earth.

This might seem a natural way to make overpopulation self-limiting. It will seem an automatic cure — but what a horrible cure it will be. Surely, the alternative of a deliberate effort to lower the birthrate is far preferable.

But is anyone listening? Does anyone care?

Some people, far from listening and caring, actually advocate a rise in the birthrate. The unbelievable Pat Robertson, currently attempting to secure the Republican presidential nomination, is in favor of such a rise. He shares the feeling that the more hands and brains there are, the more that can be done and thought. Moreover, he feels that we need more young people who actually do the work, since with a low birthrate, the elderly multiply and they are a drain on society.

Surely, the reverse is true. In an overpopulated society, people grow old and weak at a faster rate, and the young are relatively weaker, too. Fertility and population growth past a certain point are obviously not strengthening. India, Bangladesh, and the nations of Africa and Latin America prove the weakening effect of overpopulation all too well.

A nation that is *not* crowded can deal with its problems. An advanced medical technology that is not overwhelmed by more problems than it can handle does more than merely keep the aging alive. It keeps them stronger, healthier, and more mentally alert. The aging are not necessarily so great a drain on society in that case.

To look at it in reverse, of what good is the increasing number of hands, if the hands are weaker? Of what good is the increasing number of brains, if those are damaged by undernourishment? Do you want *lots* of stuff, or *good* stuff? You can't have both.

Some people are constantly afraid of "race suicide." (That's rather like constantly fearing a drought during a downpour that has been continuing without a break for centuries.)

Some people fear that a neighboring country with a higher birthrate will outbreed their own country and take them over. Illegal immigrants from Mexico, for instance, flood into the American southwest in unstoppable numbers. They don't do it, however, to "take us over." They are fleeing a land that can't feed them because of its steady

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increase in population — and they are coming into a land which is willing to offer them jobs at wages lower than native-born Americans will accept. If Mexicans remain at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder, they will be as useful to society as other immigrants have been.

If Mexico were to stabilize its population, the pressure for emigration would greatly be reduced, for people, generally, given a chance would rather remain in their own society.

Is a high birthrate necessary to supply cannon fodder? In the days before World War II, France's birthrate was down while Nazi Germany offered many prizes to women with many children. The Nazis were openly rewarding women for producing cannon fodder, reducing them to the status of brood mares.

To be sure, Germany then overwhelmed France in 1940, but it wasn't a matter of more men; it was a matter of better organization, better technology, and better generals. The proof is, first, that Italy also offered prizes for children in the 1930's, and it did them no good whatever. And that, between 1750 and 1850, Great Britain overwhelmed India, though India was far larger than Great Britain in both area and population.

Nowadays, mere number in wars amount to less and less. What counts are, on the one hand, trained guerrillas, relatively few in number, and, on the other, advanced machines and relatively small numbers of specialists who can handle high-tech. And in the end, of course, there are nuclear bombs that are quite able to kill virtually everyone without distinction, thus making numbers irrelevant.

In short, wars in the old fashioned sense are impossible. Most nations now have soldiers that are never used for any purpose but to kill their own countrymen in case of unrest. For this is it necessary to increase population and destroy the world?

But is anyone listening? Does anyone care?

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Felix Gotschalk wrote "Menage A Super-Trois" (May 1987). His latest story concerns a nursing home of the future, whose residents undergo an implant that seems to give them a new lease on life, until some of the "pluggies" begin to die. . .

Nakajima Cyberspace

By Felix C. Gotschalk

OLD DOC SAM Benedict and I were sitting on the veranda of our building under the soaring arches of the Hideki Hilton Geriatric Dome. We were drinking small vials of Metaxa and talking about supernatural experiences. Sam was ninety, and a retired physician, and I was eighty-five, and a retired barrister. I had never had a supernatural experience of any sort, though I had always wanted to. My cat died of old age, and cried out an hour before he gave up his feline ghost. I thought he might be calling me to say good-bye, but our local cat expert said that such behavior was instinctual, not supernatural. I guess that dreams were the closest things to supernatural I ever experienced, but in all my years of life, I very rarely had the good, lucid, power-type dreams. The 1940 movie *Fantasia* had enveloped me in richly surreal fantasy, and the oscillographic analogates of trumpet blares and cymbal crashes were very like the cyberspace patterns Doc Benedict was telling me about. It was the year of 2020, and some of the residents of the dome were opting for microsoft cranial plugs,

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and then jacking into computers that generated simstin effects. Doc Sam said that was the ultimate supernatural experience, and then he told me that he had a plug. I was really shocked.

"Jesus, you let the medics drill a hole in your head?" I asked him.

"It's a one-sixty-fourth-inch opening, Max," he said matter-of-factly, "little more than a pinhole. It feels good, and the pictures are great. At my age, it's like a new lease on life." The sun was a fat, humid blister low over the palmetto groves in the west, and the ocean breezes blew softly on Sam's heavily lined face. He turned his head to show me the microsoft, low on his occipital. It looked like an ordinary knurled dial, very innocent in appearance, hardly bigger than a dime.

"The jack is underneath," Sam said, "about as big around as a pencil. You ought to try one, Max. It's better than anything I have ever experienced."

"Better than sex?" I asked. I hadn't had a woman for fifteen years, and asssumed my spermatogensis had shut down. I assumed this was so in Sam's case, though he looked alert and mischievous today.

"It can be like an orgasm in every part of your body, if you patch in to that kind of program." He smiled and looked smug as a Cheshire cat.

"Mitsu-Shield cover the cost?" I was tight with my monthly Social Security voucher of $1,218 and my $1,407 pension chip. Geriatric life didn't come cheap at the Hideki Hilton in the year 2020.

"Eighty-seven percent of it," Sam replied. "No problem."

"How long you been plugged in to, ah, whatever it is — the cyberspace?"

"Been a month now."

"Any side effects?" Now I sounded like the doctor.

"I feel like sleeping for twelve hours or so after a session. It is the deepest, most dreamless sleep I have ever had. The medics monitor your life systems while you're jacked in. When I die, I think I want to die in cyberspace."

"What's the cost of the, um, sessions?"

"Varies. Fifty dollars an hour for the basic visuals, though, believe me, basic is a tame word for them. You progress to more complex simstins that can go to one hundred dollars per session. They call it the, ah, *holistic sensorium* — smells, tastes, audios, great tactiles — I mean, like, everything." Sam didn't use expressions like that before he got the plug.

"What's that like?"

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"No words can describe it, man. I can only recommend that you get plugged in with us. Do it before you die, Max. After all, you're no spring chicken." Then the gnarled old bastard nudged me hard in the ribs, and I farted. He laughed like hell. He was acting like a young man, for a few minutes anyway.

Six of us sort of hung out together at our compound, and it wasn't long before I was the only one in the group (the "Hoary Bores," some of the women called us) who didn't have a microsoft. We were in fact a hoary bunch, but soon I was the only one who was a relative bore, for the others were lively, bright-eyed, "wired," and ceaseless in their enthusiastic talk about the wonders of their de facto cyborg status. I began to feel left out, even though I saw the plugs as risky, and the peer pressure was on me to "get plugged in." Even Cecil Love, the prude of our group, had a plug. He was eighty, and a retired Baptist preacher who had warm milk and Hydrox cookies at bedtime. We tried to tell him that milk was poison for him at his age (since his rennin-curdler-ferment had shut down years ago), but he argued that liquor was the consummate hedonistic evil. Now he had a shamelessly hedonistic joy-plug in his skull, and was telling me I should "get on board." "I've been to heaven and hell and back, Max," he told me. He had been a real wet blanket all his life, and now he acted high all the time. I kept feeling that highs were fun, but that you paid a price for them later.

I talked to a lot of other people about the microsofts, and found out that most of them were considering the operation. Sam's eighty-five-year-old girlfriend, Emma, was pissed off because he was ignoring her in favor of what she called "dangerous cortical stimulation." In fact, the women seemed to be antiplug; and the men, pro. I resisted the cynical conclusion that the women disliked the plugs because they gave the men extra-feminine pleasure. It was clear, though, that those residents with the most money were the ones opting for the plugs.

A month went by, and plug fever was sweeping through the entire dome. Twenty-five thousand of us lived beneath and around the huge seaside structure, and in our building alone, about fifty of the one hundred residents already had the microsofts, and were happily jacking into cyberspace every day or two. The sessions stressed their life systems — that was obvious, for protracted sleep always followed, and then a period of one to three days before they were ready for another trip. "Pluggies," they called

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themselves. The men took to wearing Nagasaki Giants baseball caps, and then so did the women. These unlikely badges of identification even began to ease out the major sociometric network of Masonry symbols. After all, who needed a ring or a pin, a secret handshake or a fez, when he could have a cranial jack that made him feel like the king of the world? Finally, I decided to test the much-heralded waters of cyberspace. I would wade in, just a bit, and try the subcutaneous demonstration session. It was being offered free, and promoted like a high-budget commercial venture.

The medics laid me supine on what looked like an upholstered surfboard, and put a mesh restrainer over me. I was predominantly bald, but they shaved twenty coin-sized spots all over my head, and attached electrodes by sliding tiny needles under the skin. It was like an EEG rig.

"The effect is only about one-quarter of the microsoft," a young physician said to me, "but it will give you an idea of what to expect of full-ranged cortical stimulation." Then they gave me intravenous Valium, which of itself, was a great pinnacle-like feeling. A sleep mask placed over my eyes blotted out my vision into truly impenetrable blackness, and I was ready for preliminary cyberspace.

"Ready, Mr. Barton?" It was the sweet voice of the sexy young female tech.

"Ready, honey. Wish you were wired up with me."

"Oh, *you*," she said, and stroked my cheek, "here we go."

The immediate effect was that of a vivid, lucid dream. I was high in the complex girders of a huge aircraft hangar, floating about like a tireless breaststroker in space. I was intensely interested in the shapes of the girders: I beams, channels, angles, bars — all polished and studded with fine long bolts and exquisitely torqued-down nuts. The corrugated metal of the roof fascinated me also, and then, in a near corner, a sudden movement froze me with fear. It was a huge spider, the body big as a football, its hairy legs folded, in frightful, retracted menace. My gut feeling was that if it moved again, I would shit my pants and die. But I approached it fearlessly, a fencing foil materialized in my hand, and, with a loud cry of "Touché!" I speared the bulbous body. It writhed wildly, the segmented legs flailing the air, but I found *pleasure* in the movement! Sharply pitched sesquialteral organ sounds reverberated in the hangar, vibrating my rib cage harmonically, and the air around me crackled with unseen static electricity. I flew down to the hangar floor, climbed into the cockpit of a bright yellow

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Stearman bipe, and willed it to move, the big black radial engine churning, the silver prop a crystal disk of sheen. I lifted off halfway down the length of the hangar floor, as giant koalas, wolverines, and coatimundis scattered, in slow motion, to both sides. The engine roar filled the resonant sheet-metal space of the hangar, and then the sound was crisp and proximal as I flew out into bright sunlight. I flew at low altitude over wonderfully detailed landscapes: bamboo groves, square lakes of velvet algae, grids of basket-weave metal, over chessboard figures of monoliths, obelisks, minarets, and spindly transmission towers. Then came mangrove swamps, forest of cypress and eucalyptus, moors, chalk cliffs, and huge grass plots, like giant putting greens. I landed the plane on a heavily wooded street, flying between tall trees, with no sense of peril. A heavily muscled Schwarzenegger gladiator strode toward me, and struck the plane's fuselage behind the cockpit, shattering the canvas skin and the wooden formers. He snatched me from the plane and held me up with one hand, as if I were a puppet. Then I was on the ground, locked in perilous eye contact with him. He snarled at me, and I snorted back at him, the sound loud as twenty horses. I set my feet, with a delicious sense of kinetic confidence, and aimed a straight jab at the muscle-plated abdomen. My fist disappeared into his stomach wall, and he bent over double. I tilted his massive jaw up with one hand and savaged his face with an uppercut. The blow sounded like the crack of a bat impacting a baseball. A beautifully detailed green and silver steam locomotive materialized, and I climbed into a high seat in an observation dome atop one of the many cars behind the engine. We began to move, slowly at first, and then faster, climbing a shallow-grade trestle, like a roller coaster. The trestle leveled out at a height of a hundred feet or so, and now the train accelerated to one hundred, two hundred, three hundred miles per hour, again moving past complex scenes: great vistas of cities, like New York in 1945, Hong Kong in 1985, Brasilia, Detroit, Moscow, Atlanta, and then, slowing down gradually, across the Golden Gate Bridge and into the steep hills of San Francisco. I was on a cable car, naked, and a naked Stephanie Powers clone approached me. Our bodies meshed, like conjugating paramecia, and I felt the tactile wonder of all her ventral surfaces on mine, her arms around my neck, her mouth affixed to mine, the parted lips, the perfect teeth, the probing tongue. My pelvis felt motionless against her, but I could feel my penile stanchion sliding, moving independently, into her vaginal cleft. A

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I stopped in at Med Central, having decided to let them drill a hole in my head.

sense of exquisite imminence began to swell in my sacral nest—

"Wake up, you randy old fox." It was the voice of the sexy female tech. Even before she removed the sleep mask, I knew I had a really thudding pillar-of-blood erection. It had tent-poled the mesh restrainer. But it detumesced rapidly.

"How was it?" she asked. "Looks like it was fun."

"Great," I sighed. "I've got to get back there."

"Microsoft's the only way to fly, Max," she said, and began to remove the electode needles from my scalp. It had been one helluva trip, and at one-quarter the intensity of serious plugging, I could hardly wait to travel full-bore.

I stopped in at Med Central, having decided to let them drill a hole in my head. Funny, the idea didn't seem risky at all. I was a believer already. There were 150 geriats ahead of me on the waiting list, and the prediction was for major delays. Extra medical teams were being brought in to expedite the operations. Rumor had it that Mitsu-Shield itself wanted exclusive coverage rights for microsoft surgery. That made me suspicious, for why would an insurer want rights to an operation that was in excessive demand? Then another rumor had it that Mitsu-Shield was a subsidiary of the Nakajima Conglomerate that owned Hideki Hilton Head, and also manufactured the microsofts, the programs, and the computers. That didn't surprise me, for interlocking directorates were common, and besides, rumors were mother's milk to us. Gossip gave us triumph responses, and we had precious few of those.

Then the pluggies with the most hours of cyberspace time began to die.

Doc Sam Benedict was the first to go. He had been a physician, and when he opted for the implant, other people were convinced it was safe. He had kept me informed — unusually well informed, as a matter of fact — of his experiences in cyberspace. He followed his doctor's instructions, jacking in to the prescribed repertories — "the pyramid," it was called. The beginning programs were low-stress, high-reward adventures; the medial ones were longer, more stressful and intense, more ultimately rewarding;

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and then there were the "heavy-ice" trips, in which, according to Sam, "you fly by the seat of your pants." These programs involved volitional hacking, access control was purposefully loose, and there was the danger of neural feedback. It was the ultimate cyberspace challenge, a kind of survival trip, a jungle trip, a cyberspatial D&D game. When Sam told me this, I suspected that jacking in ("flying," the pluggies called it) was addictive: the more intense the cortical stimulation, the more you needed for subsequent satisfaction. And Doc Sam had confided that he was afraid the cortstim effect might be cumulative: that the myelin sheath encasing the neural pathways might be losing its resistance, its insulative function. "It might just be burning the plastic off my wires, Max," he had joked. I didn't think it was funny.

I was suspicious about Sam's death, but couldn't find out any of the details, beyond the fact that he had died while undergoing cortstim. He didn't have any relatives, and the Dome Authority was his executor; in fact, all residents of HHH deeded their estates to the Nakajima Conglomerate, the deed effective on the demise of the resident. I didn't like that, but the Masonic Homes had been doing it for centuries.

Two pluggies in Beufort House died the week following Sam's vaporization ceremony, then four in Yemassee Tower the next week, and then eight in Port Royal Arms the next. Of course, people died every day at Hideki Hilton. With an aged population of twenty-five thousand geriats, that was to be expected. But the pluggies were a close-knit group, now numbering about one thousand, and their sociometric grapevine had a strong communicative spirit. They were worried about the deaths, all of them occurring while the decedents were in cyberspace. Paranoid or not, the rumor now was that the HHH authorities were using the cranial plugs as a systematic method of killing off the wealthiest residents, so as to inherit their estates. And the worst thing was that, while there were a few firebrands and troublemakers among us, we were mostly helpless dependents: creaking oldsters, ministered to by an army of nurses and attendants. Most of us had the "learned helplessness" orientation.

When sixteen pluggies died at Folly Beach Geodeck the following week, I saw the pattern: it was only the fifth week since Sam had died in heavy-ice cyberspace harness, and the deaths were coming on in geometric progression.

I was an organismically young eighty-five, with a reputation for grab-

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bing bulls by their horns; alert and competitive I was, with not a bit of senility. Well, hardly any. I waited another week, with a sense of almost mystical dread, and when the death count was thirty-two at Bluffton Manor, I knew I had to do something. And I was going to be paranoid about it.

I got a pass, and took the Tin Goose flyer to Savannah, where there was a safe U.S. post office. A long-standing rumor at HHH was that all outgoing mail was read and censored by the Dome Authority. The Tin Goose was always a fun ride: wicker seats, no parachutes, three uncowled radials chattering, fixed landing gear, low altitude, low speed — really great. Of course it was all simulated, but I couldn't tell it from the real thing. At the century-old post office building, I sent a registered CRT communiqués to the FBI in D.C., the regional Shogun in Columbia, and to Melvin Belli in Frisco. Belli was one hundred years old, and 42 percent bionic, but still the best attorney in the country. I bought a ring, fitted with a squeeze-activated stun-wand, and put it on my wedding ring finger. Weapons of any kind were forbidden at HHH. A thousand-dollar courtesan propositioned me while I sat in the sun in Talmadge Park, and she was pissed when I graciously declined her offer. I took the conch-train and the hydrofoil back to my geriatric home just before dusk.

Chief Administrator Nakamura was known among the residents as the "head honcho-san." He was a truly inscrutable Jap, all smiles and bows and hissing sibilants, and he called residents by their first names and endearing suffix "san." He was an ostensibly accessible little mandarin, forever saying that his office door was always open to the residents, and that no appointments were necessary, though I don't believe many took him up on his accessibility. Hideki Hilton Head was very well run, and there were few complaints, though I was set to register a big one this morning.

"Ah, Max-San," he said, standing and bowing from behind his huge black onyx desk. His beautiful geisha secretary had announced me. A perfectly scaled bonsai tree stood in a rock-filled tray on a corner of the desk, and an accordionized sheaf of printouts in the center, like a bizarre Baedeker of computer language. Nakamura was a small man in a well-tailored black suit, and he looked to me rather like an overly satisfied mortician. "How may this humble servant of Nakajima serve you?" I had to assume that there was a cobra beneath all that silky defense.

"By issuing an order to cease all future implants of cranial plugs," I said

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straightaway, forcing some premature indignation into my tone. I hoped to goad him into a rash, cat-out-of-the-bag response, but he looked cool as a cube of sushi. But then, I had barely started on him.

"That is an extraordinary request" — his tone was subtly guarded — "and one I can see no reason to grant. Our residents are well pleased with their, ah, plugs—"

"Just cut the shit, man." I leaned on the desk, eight knuckles and two thumbs on the lustrous surface. "You know as well as I do that those plugs are deadly." There. I had instructed him in the handling of excreta, impugned his motives, put words in his mouth, and attributed an unjustified conclusion to him. All that ought to trigger him, I thought. But it didn't.

"You speak rashly, Mr. Barton." He dropped the endearment-san, and his voice lost a bit of its smoothness. "You speak irresponsibly of a matter of no concern to you. And your manner is quite less than decorous. It ill becomes the dignity of your past profession—"

"Rice balls and sushi shit, Naki-San," I insulted him again, denigrating his native food, likening them to testicular configurations and piscatorial excreta, and addressing him in mocking corruptions of his name, all in a sardonic tone. I was using fighting words on him. "You and your slant-eyed, pencil-dicked cronies are killing off my friends in order to confiscate their estates. I am onto your game, you small yellow ingester of fish heads—" I was being outright abusive, and I thought I was starting to get at him, but he retained his facade of inscrutability, as if he knew I was baiting him. He pressed a recessed tab on the side of his desk, and two huge sumo attendants came into the room. I had heard about these two. They were four-hundred-pound fatties, overkill-competent to handle the likes of me, and our grapevine called them Tweedledum and Tweedledee. They wore long black robes, white headbands, and they kept their distance.

"You are an unruly patient who may require restraint, Mr. Barton," Nakamura said, activating the depositional TV cameras. Now everything was being taped. He was smarter than I thought. I switched frequencies.

"It has come to my attention, in the past five weeks, that sixty-two people have died while undergoing cortical stimulation. This is a greatly disproportionate mortality rate, and I submit that the recipients of these microsoft plugs are being systematically victimized by the Nakajima Conglomerate." The sumos stood, still as statues, with no cues of threat in

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their stance, beyond their great hulking bodies. I sat down in a chrome frame chair. "You are doubtless aware of these deaths."

"Statistical data in all catagories are reviewed in our monthly staff meetings, Mr. Barton. I am unaware of any significant change in the basal mortality rate among our residents."

"The basal rate is precisely that, Mr. Nakamura. It obscures the specifics. I am assured that you have daily access to mortality printouts, retrievable by autopsy codes, and that an analysis of these data would validate my allegations. I request that you access these data, for the past five weeks. The mortality curve is one of positive acceleration."

"Your request is duly noted. Now I must ask you to leave—"

"You will also find that the 62 people who have died in your Nakajima-franchised cyberspace all had substantial estates. Centile 95 and up, I believe."

"Are you refusing to leave, sir?" Now he sounded authoritative. The sumos unfolded their massive hairless arms.

"You gonna need eight hundred pounds of sumo fat boys to throw me out?" I went back to insult. "Hey, you're killing off the rich ones first, right? Making a quick windfall for the Naka-fucking-Jimas, you candy-ass, paper samurai—"

Nakamura nodded, and the sumos came toward me, slowly, massively. I remained seated, waiting until the last moment, taking the chance that they would be gentle with me. Two sumos didn't rough up an eighty-five-year-old man, not on depositional camera, anyway. When the first one stood close beside me and touched my arm, I turned, as if in acquiescence, and then I shot my hand into his crotch and fired the stunner ring. He bellowed like a steer and shot backward, impacting the second sumo, so that both men crashed through the delicate ornamental screens that stood along one wall of the room. The man I zapped lay on the floor, but the other one was on his feet right away.

"Ten feet effective range!" I brayed, pointing the uncoiled wand at the sumo, and then at Nakamura, "and five shots left. Do I have your attention, gentlemen? You, Naki-San, get your ass over there and stand by the fat boy." I feinted the rings at him, and he cringed. He moved next to the sumo, and the pair made quite a study in contrasts: the four-hundred-pounder and the 120-pounder.

"Weaponry!" Nakamura hissed indignantly. "You will be banished from

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Hideki Hilton. You will be exiled in the Parris Island marshes—" I walked behind the desk and checked the control panel. The tabs were all in Japanese. Shit. I wanted the room secured. I would have to work fast.

"What I want is a stop order on all cranial plug surgery," I said, moving toward the two men. "Call it a temporary injunction, call it a medical advisory, call it anything you like for face-saving purposes, but get on the net and order it done."

"Such an order would be invalid. I would be acting under duress."

"I could duress your Ben-Wah balls," I said, bluffing a move of the wand at his crotch. I motioned for him to sit at the terminal deck; and, to the sumo: "You, blubber-san. You allasame sittee on floor. You savvy? Chop-Chop." It was a cheap Chinese shot, but I had all the power. Or at least that's what the two Japs thought. The sumo sat down, and looked for the world like a Buddha statue.

"And validate *these*," I said to Nakamura, placing the chips of the CRT message I had sent at Savannah. They were to the effect that I had evidence of the plot, and planned to confront Nakamura. When he networked the chips, it was like signing a receipt for a registered letter. I wanted my geriatric ass double-covered, my bets hedged. I stood behind Nakamura and watched him key in the messages: the directive to Med Central, and the validation of the three chips. Soon enough, the dome would be crawling with authorities: Jap, American, and, of course, Belli. I scanned the printouts and felt safe enough, but to be on the safe side I called Cecil Love, Red Dog Moore, Alpo-breath McCune, and Emma Hairston, and told them all where I was, and that I was walking the five hundred yards across the quad to my building. I didn't want to be bushwhacked. Then I took the ring from my finger and placed it on the desk. "A gesture of good faith, Administrator," I said. I set my shoulders and walked out of the room. No one would ever know (or maybe they would — hah!) that the stunner ring was a single-shot model, with no effective range at all. A six-shooter would have cost me six times what I paid for the ring, and I am tight with my money.

EPILOGUE: Wellsir, Hell hath no fury like a one-hundred-year-old bionic barrister. Belli waded into the matter like an avenging angel, quickly establishing that intracranial stimulation degraded myelin sheath resistance cumulatively, and was a proximal cause of death. He established that

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the aggressively marketed implant program was blatantly at odds with medical ethics, and, in an impassioned speech before the grand jury (Belli had a high-decibel laryngeal amplifier), he established complicity within the Nakajima Conglomerate, an oratory that made the 1896 Cross of Gold speech ring tame in comparison.

Needless to say, we geriats won a great victory, though the practicing pluggies were exceedingly reluctant to cease their flying. But operations ceased.

Maybe bionic hedonism is one of the few pleasures of old age. The new administrator, Yamashita, is quietly letting it be known that Nakajima has available, for select clientele only, a new implant called an, ah, *orgasm generator*: prostate kickers for the gentlemen, and pelvic floor rumblers for the ladies. I am witholding my indignation response until I have had an opportunity to try this new product. I should not wish to die in cyberspace, but to die in orgasmic space is very likely the best way to go. And to *live* in orgasmic space — ah! That's the only way to fly.

Coming Soon

Next month: The July issue features Harlan Ellison's first new story in a year, "Eidolons," a typically powerful and offbeat tale that you won't want to miss. Also, the beginning of a three part series by Phyllis Eisenstein, "Beyond the Red Lord's Reach," about the teleporting minstrel Alaric, whose adventures have appeared in these pages before.

Column No. 30 of "Harlan Ellison's Watching" was delayed and will appear next month, along with the results of Competition 45.

Soon: New stories by Frederik Pohl, Lucius Shepard, Ron Goulart, George Alec Effinger, R. Bretnor, Vance Aandahl, John Morressy, Ian Watson and many others.

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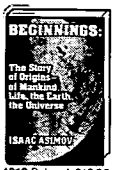

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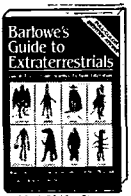

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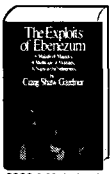

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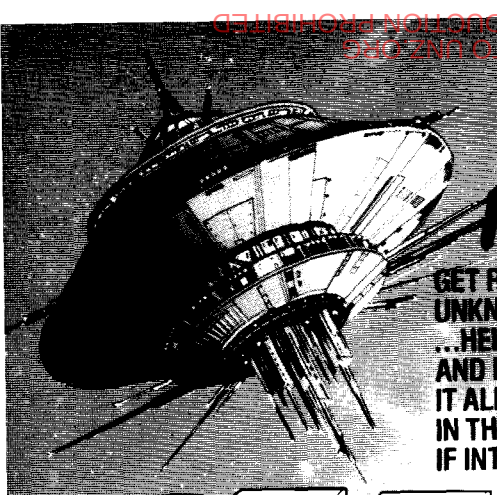

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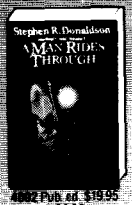

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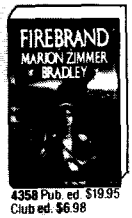

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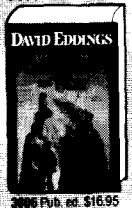

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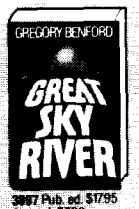

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